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A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

June 16, 2000

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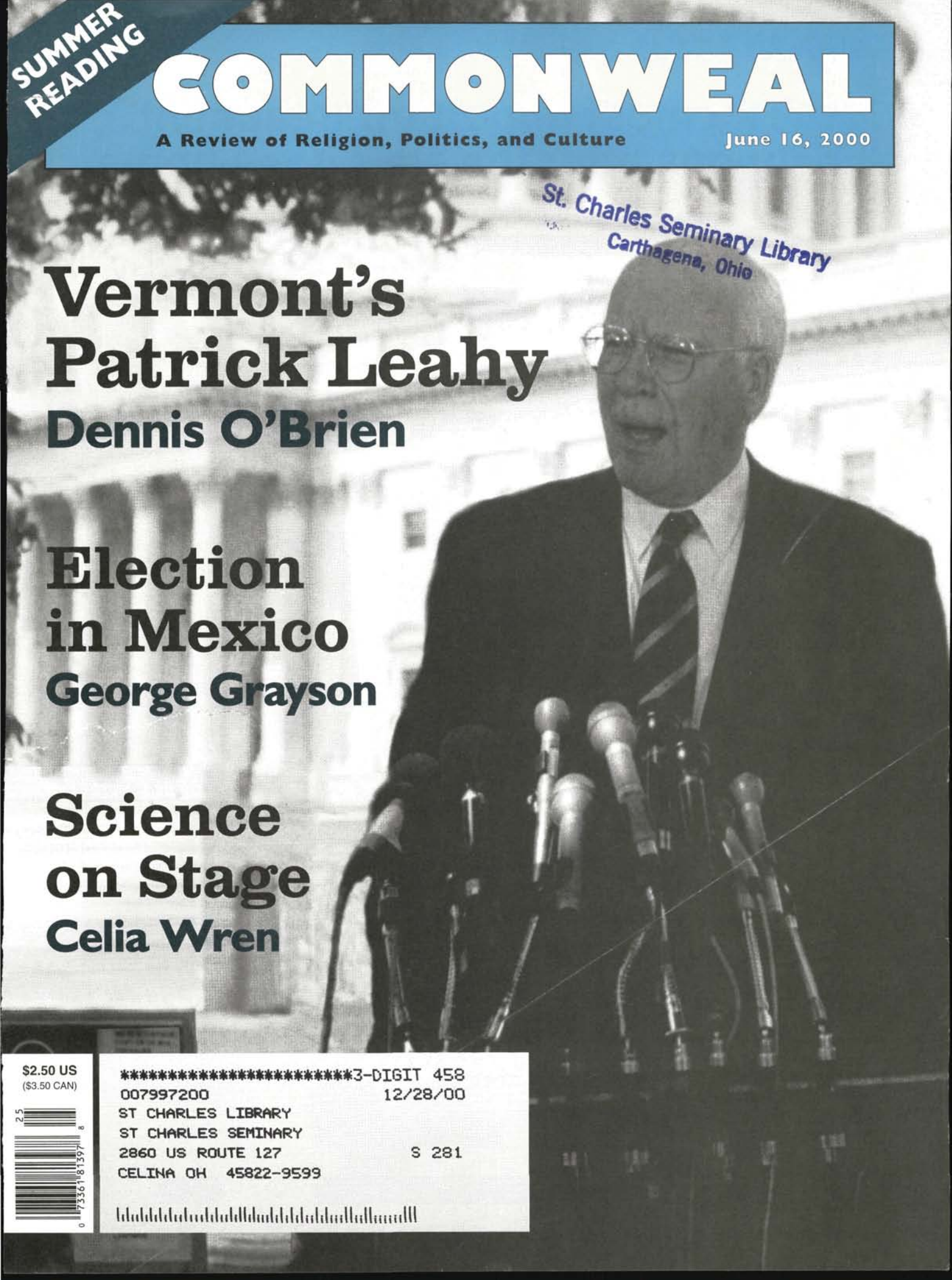

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COMMONWEAL

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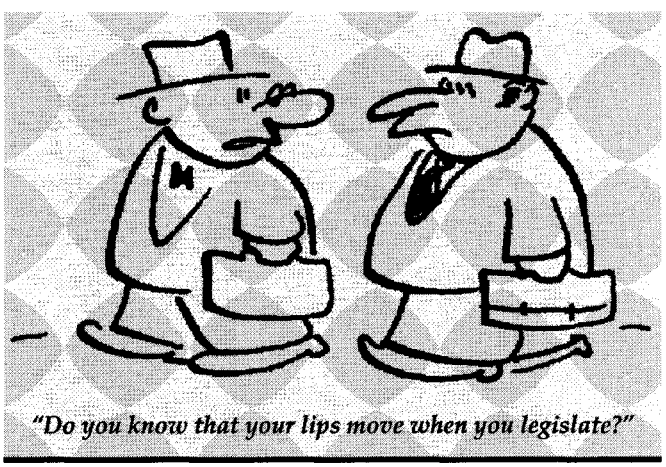

"Do you know that your lips move when you legislate?"

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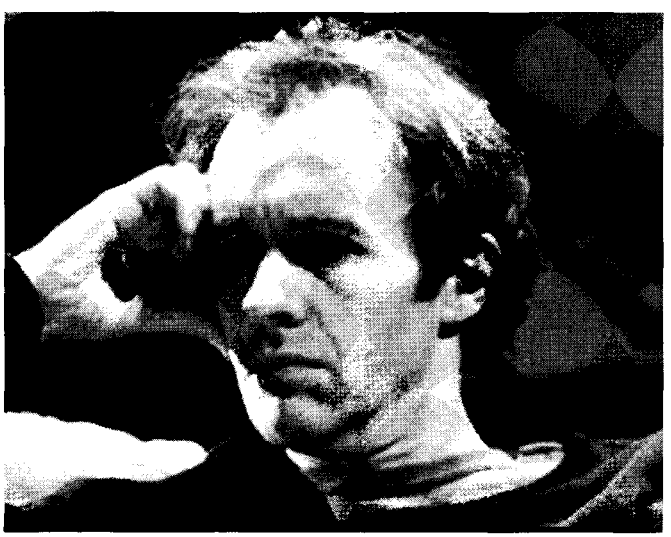

Stephen Dillane sporting with ideas

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To the Editors

Art appreciation

The "Sensation" art exhibit ["Virgins No More," May 19] may have seemed offensive to some, including Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, but it is not clear that the artist, Chris Ofili, intended to be insulting. His culture has always used fertility symbols in art, some so exaggerated that they are not usually reproduced in publications. A sober look at his *Mary* work conveys innocent beauty, not insult. Why should feminists revolt over the depiction of sex organs, as the writer suggests they should?

What is really offensive is that Steinfels appears to approve of the "devout Catholic" who poured white paint over the work. Could it be that an art appreciation course is in order?

JOHN P. ELVIN
Saint Petersburg, Fla.

Scouts' honor?

"Scouts' Honor" [Editorial, May 19] craftily raised several shibboleths about gay persons with the skill that respectable obstructionists of an earlier era did over intermarriage and integrated housing.

Eagle Scout James Dale was regarded as morally fit only when he was willing to partake in the pervasive cultural lie about the presence of homosexuality in all of human life. Gay persons are, of course, everywhere: in our families, our churches, our military, even in our Boy Scouts. But *Commonweal* demands that they keep silent, lest they find themselves, as Dale has, scapegoated and banished to society's margins.

What you ask of Dale and all the millions like him in society, is to keep mute about their intrinsic self, their intrinsic worth. You implicitly suggest that there is a societal value to be placed on this enormous universal deception, with all its negative fallout, but you fail to apply even the simplest principle or teaching of Jesus to this man and his untenable situation.

Your final caveat, regarding tolerance, is one I would have thought *Commonweal* incapable of making. I can imagine no other situation where you would ask a vilified person or group to tolerate injustice.

I am left with great sadness, but yet with hope. I suspect you speak for many in the church who are in the grip of the fear that homosexuals, like women, if allowed to be fully themselves, would wreak havoc on the divinely inspired order. Your fear is justified. When homosexuals—and women—are fully unleashed by the Spirit, the present order will crumble. Whether the Boy Scouts can survive is but a sidebar to whether the church, as she is presently knows herself and her work, will.

WILLIAM D. GLENN
San Rafael, Calif.

The editors reply:

With accusations of bigotry and homophobia, and his invocations of the "intrinsic self," in this instance William Glenn seems to be the master of shibboleths. We confess that what the proper attitude toward homosexuality should be in the Boy Scouts or in the church remains a dilemma for us. Does that mean we are complacent about injustice and ignore Jesus' teachings? It is more complicated than that. Glenn's confident prediction about the impending end of the "divinely inspired order" does not inspire confidence in his grasp of the facts. How can the questions that homosexuality raises for traditional morality be discussed honestly if advocates of change dismiss those who disagree as acting out of mere prejudice and fear? Tolerance, we repeat, must work both ways on this question.

Remember Guatemala

After reading *Commonweal*'s editorial, "Colombia Conundrum" [May 5], I was reminded of the saying: "Knowledge comes from taking things apart; Wisdom comes from putting things together." After a comprehensive analysis of the question of the $ 1.6 billion U.S. foreign military aid package, including thirty Black Hawk helicopters, for Colombia, *Commonweal* lamely asks: "Will increased U.S. aid work? No one really knows."

In truth, there are many people who know. The *campesinos* in Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador whose villages have been destroyed, bodies burned, children massacred, and loved ones "disappeared," know. The refugees from Central and South America, who have gone into exile in various countries all over the world only to be hounded by countries like the United States, know. The pained survivors of torture, including students, doctors, labor union organizers, missionary priests, and nuns, know. The thousands of people who have worked to close the School of the Americas, and their leaders who have gone to prison for their convictions, know. Even the trainers at the School of the Americas, who never tire of telling us they cannot be responsible for the human-rights atrocities of their graduates, know.

All of these know because their wisdom comes from bitter experience. The United States has been there and done that—many times. *Commonweal* recommends safeguards. The only true safeguard is to say no to military aid. The military aid itself is a human-rights violation. The harvest of this military aid for Colombia will be more evil, violence, and death.

PAUL FERRIS
Annapolis, Md.
The writer is a member of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA.

The editors reply:

The dangers Paul Ferris refers to were acknowledged in the editorial. But it

(Continued on page 28)

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The working poor

The United States has enjoyed eight years of unparalleled economic expansion. It was not until recently, however, that the new prosperity reached the nation's poor. Unemployment is near a thirty-year low, long-stagnant wages have begun to rise, and welfare rolls have been cut in half. But despite this good news, the U.S. poverty rate is higher than it was in the 1970s and the disparity between the rich and the poor has caused some to call the so-called "information" economy a new Gilded Age. One in eight Americans still lives in poverty. For children, the situation is even worse—one in five children, including 40 percent of all minority children, is poor. Poverty among American children is twice as high as it is for their peers in Europe.

The reasons for the persistence of such high levels of poverty in the United States are, of course, hotly disputed. Advocates of the 1996 welfare reform, which ended the federal entitlement and put in place work requirements and time limits for welfare benefits, argued that work was available and that the dignity and independence provided by employment would solve the problem of poverty. Thanks to a booming economy and the incentives for work built into the reform, many former welfare recipients have found jobs. Few people, least of all welfare clients, dispute the value of work or the benefits of not relying on a government handout. Nonetheless, most of the jobs available to low-skilled workers remain low paying. To require the poor to work is not morally problematic if work is rewarded by a living wage. But, as the poverty statistics demonstrate, a living wage remains an elusive goal for most of the working poor.

Texas Governor George W. Bush, the Republican party's presumptive presidential nominee, has made helping the poor and the disadvantaged a central theme of his campaign. Whatever one thinks of Bush's "compassionate conservatism," at least in tone it reflects a shift in the national mood concerning what government can do for the less well-off. Several recent polls have indicated that Americans think government action on problems such as education, health care, and poverty is more important than paying down the national debt or cutting taxes. In short, after a period when the idea that government could help the poor was loudly derided, the tenor of the political debate has shifted. Ironically, it seems that ending "welfare as we know it" may have contributed to renewed public confidence in the competence of government. Feeling good about their own economic prospects and having regained a measure of faith in government, the public now appears more willing to consider society's obligations to the poor.

Much can be done to aid the poor by better administering programs already in place. Shockingly, only 40 percent of families eligible for food stamps are currently receiving them. Only a third of children entitled to Medicaid coverage are getting it. These astounding oversights can be explained in part by the sharp reduction in the welfare rolls. Having left welfare, many poor families severed their ties to the government agencies responsible for administering food stamps and Medicaid. In other instances, states have erected unnecessary and sometimes illegal barriers for eligible recipients to overcome (*see*, E.J. Dionne, "Keeping Promises," May 19). A concerted effort by community groups, churches, government agencies,

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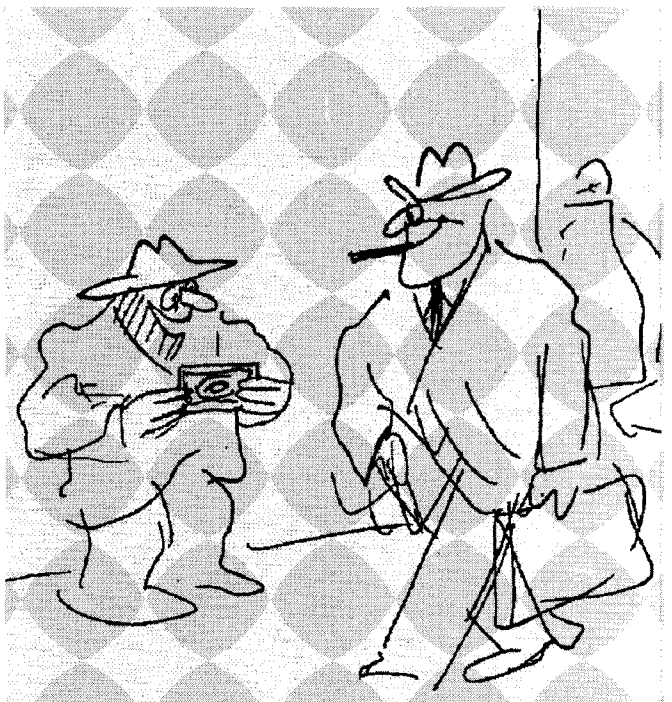
and politicians should help to dismantle these barriers as well as reconnect needy families with the government assistance to which they are entitled.

Low wages, however, remain the bane of the American economy and the greatest disincentive for the poor seeking work. Getting more money into the pockets of the working poor is crucial. Currently, the nation's most extensive and successful antipoverty program is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This program now puts about $25 billion annually, or up to $3,800 in tax rebates per worker, into the hands of the poor. The efficacy of EITC is so widely acknowledged that some states add to the federal refund with EITC programs of their own. Because it is tied to work, there is broad, bipartisan support for the EITC. Raising the amount of money the working poor can earn while remaining eligible for the EITC is a good way to expand the effects of the program. Lowering the income-tax rate for the poor who earn too much to qualify for EITC would alleviate the perverse incentive not to seek better-paying jobs for those just beginning to climb the economic ladder.

There is much more that can and should be done to help America's working poor. Better public transportation is needed to get the urban poor to the suburbs, where the real growth in new jobs is taking place. The suburban poor need better public transit as well. Affordable housing and housing subsidies are also essential. Unionizing workers is, of course, the surest way to raise wages. Finally, better schools and access to health care are key to lifting the next generation out of poverty. No single approach or program will be sufficient. Both public and private initiatives are essential. Social, moral, and religious efforts to discourage the proliferation of single-parent families will also be high on the list of realistic antipoverty initiatives.



"A buck! Talk about an upturn in the economy!"

Americans, by and large, want to help those trapped in poverty. But Americans are, by and large, a pragmatic people, and they will support only government programs that bring results. Building on what already works is the best way to begin to include the poor in the prosperity enjoyed by the majority of their fellow citizens.

CORRECTION ■ The editorial "Something New," which appeared in *Commonweal*'s June 2 issue, mischaracterized Judge John Noonan's relationship with the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (IACS). Judge Noonan is not involved in any way with IACS fundraising activities. We apologize for the error.

THE EDITORS

ET CETERA

Message in a bottle ■ Paul Celan once described a poem as "a letter in a bottle thrown to sea with the—surely not always strong—hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on the shoreline of the heart." Osip Mandelstam likened the poet to "the shipwrecked sailor who throws a sealed bottle into the sea at a critical moment," and a poem to a "testament of the deceased" that will find "its secret addressee."

The hope incarnated in poetry took on new force this spring when Michael Wall of Derrymore, Ireland, plucked a bottle out of the ocean and found a letter inside dated September 2, 1979 asking the recipient to please write back. A pair of teenage girls had dropped the bottle off a Nantucket (Massachusetts) ferry twenty-one years and three-thousand miles ago. Theirs was the work of a perfect summer day, spontaneously undertaken and skillfully executed.

Wall lives in the same town, works in the same mill, and fishes the same shore he did as a young man in the summer of 1979, the *Boston Globe* (May 12) reported. The long-parted women have had peripatetic adulthoods. He met the bottle's advent with an understated awe—"a long journey, you know." They confessed to a rush of longing for things past. The trio plans to meet soon.

Here is an instance of the world's grace, a happy confluence of human attention and natural caprice, and a reminder of the beauty and pleasure which may come into being when we act and write toward a future unknown to us.

In keeping with *Commonweal*'s usual schedule, only one issue is published each month during July and August. The next issue will be dated July 14.

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SIDNEY CALLAHAN

TURN OFF THAT CELL PHONE!

Bare your soul in private

Jane, don't hang up! Jane, talk to me. Jane, Jane, JANE! As everyone on the Amtrak train in the vicinity of his cell phone could attest, Jane deigned to answer her husband. The couple seemed to be having difficulties with their daughter, who also took a turn in their prolonged conversation. One call led to another, and for two and one-half hours, nearby passengers were involuntarily privy to the loud personal conversations of this cell-phone enthusiast. Other people in the surrounding seats were also making and receiving calls (briefer and less loud), but Jane's husband took the prize for insouciant intrusions into our shared public space.

I dearly wanted to say something to him, and started to frame a protest as I heard him announce in his last call that he was only twenty minutes from his station stop. How could I peacefully, nonviolently, state my objections and confront what appeared to be either deliberate rudeness or invincible ignorance? Unfortunately, my own invincible cowardice and over-socialized taboo against public displays of irritation doomed me to hesitation, and a lost opportunity. At least I can lodge a complaint with the conductor, I thought. But when I found him, he was in a back seat busily talking on *his* cell phone.

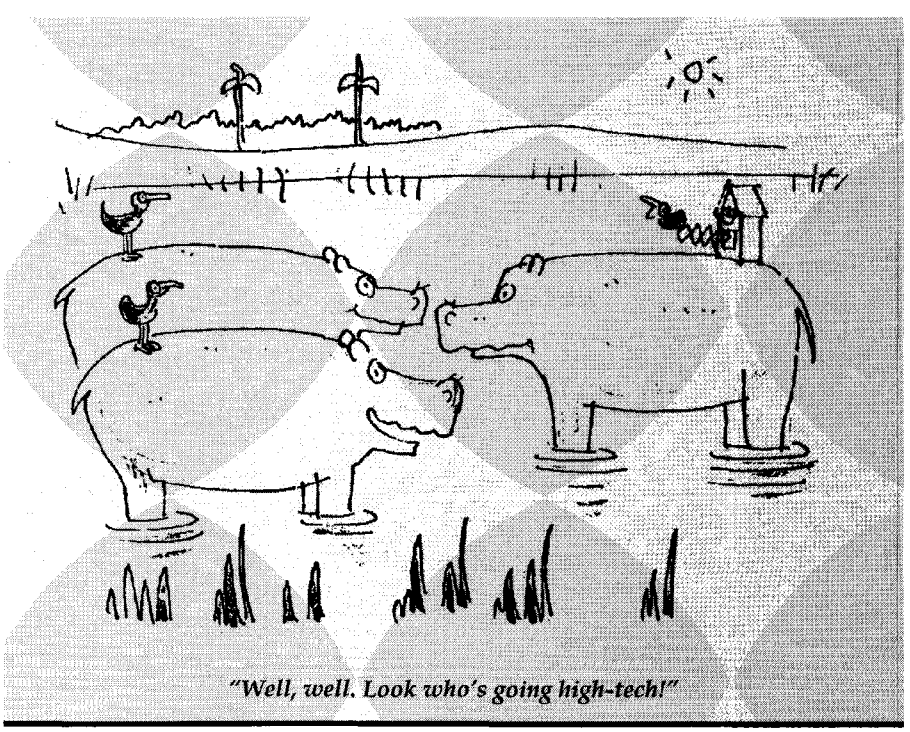
Who will deliver us from this new plague? Second-hand intimacy is even more agitating than second-hand smoke. Don't the users of cell phones understand that they are breaking the implicit rules of public behavior? Everyone has a right to civil inattention and a buffer zone safe from unwanted intrusions by touch, leering stares, or intrusive personal remarks. I don't want to be ogled, pushed, pinched, or have my ears assaulted. Involuntary immersion in other people's intimate lives, audibly broadcast in trains, buses, planes, elevators, or on the street, is a subtle form of battery. Never mind the danger cell phones present in automobiles.

If there are laws against boom boxes, car alarms, and leaf blowers, why not against cell phones? At least we could have special train cars or segregated sections for those who must intrude on other people's privacy. In New York, the opera and Broadway theaters seem to have gotten the problem under control. The stern preshow announcements are followed by audience compliance—probably because of the astronomical prices of today's tickets. At the other extreme, a subway token buys immunity from cell phones, because there is no reception underground. Stolid impassive crowding isn't so bad, if you can read or think your own thoughts.

Am I overreacting? Not really. I deny the charge of being a noise-pollution freak. I live above the railroad tracks and delay conversations twice hourly while trains roar by. I also don't mind hearing the tugs chugging up the Hudson. I find the beep-beep of the newspaper trucks backing up at 4 A.M. less attractive, but I tolerate them patiently, along with the noise in our apartment house where neighbors constantly reconstruct kitchens or install new in-the-wall air conditioners. With our bouncy, squealing four-year-old granddaughter in residence, I could never complain about other people's racket.

I don't object to cell phones because they are noisy. With this growing imposition of second-hand intimacy and forced communication, I'm offended by the erosion of shared cultural norms of appropriate shame. Certain kinds of self-exposure flout the rules for personal boundaries. When other people don't understand, or don't care, I become ashamed *for* them, since they are too ignorant or crude to be ashamed of themselves. Public confessions on TV talk shows make my skin prickle. Lovers who insist on sexual displays in public give the lie to evolutionary psychology's dictum that in every known human culture sexual intimates seek privacy. Some things are best kept in the closet.

Once, in a hair salon, I was dozing under towels and gradually became aware of a long tirade coming from a young woman across the room. She was



"Well, well. Look who's going high-tech!"

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baring her soul to the beauty operator (or hair artiste) in a bitter complaint about her mother-in-law's awful behavior. As the story went on and on, and the names of other siblings in the family came up, I slowly realized that I knew this daughter-in-law (certainly no Ruth to a Naomi). She was berating my old friend, whom I'd always admired. Horrors! How could I become invisible? I sank down in my chair, raised a magazine before my face, and prayed that I would not be recognized. (I wasn't.) As an innocent bystander, I knew that I had done nothing wrong. I did not feel guilty, but I was instinctively embarrassed at overhearing private family matters that I had no business knowing.

Surely, such attacks of shame and embarrassment over personal exposure reflect our human sense of solidarity and identification with others. Noah's children were ashamed to see him lying naked in a drunken stupor. When we see friends or family members get drunk, fall down, and make fools of themselves, we suffer vicarious shame for them. (W.C. Fields is not funny.) When waiters drop trays, performers forget their lines, and folks make God awful speeches at weddings or wakes, we try to save face by pretending nothing untoward has occurred—if we can't actually flee the scene. I'm often the one edging out the door at such times—at least out of the range of the omnipresent video cameras.

The culture seems to be heading in a more shameless direction. People are putting their intimate lives on Web sites, and new TV programs are scheduled that will cover a person's every move for twenty-four hours a day. Realistically, there's little imminent hope for laws curbing cell phones. It would interfere with a booming market. Until saturation or cultural conversion takes place, I may be forced to buy a Walkman and program it with white noise. □

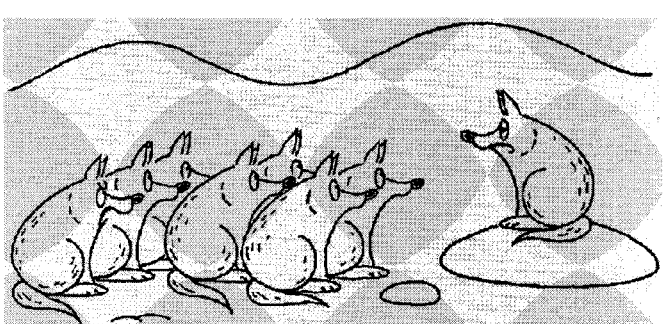
George W. Grayson

REPORT FROM MEXICO

The dinosaurs & the fox

MEXICO CITY. Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has controlled the nation's presidency by hook and often by crook since the 1920s, is struggling to hold on to the presidential palace in Mexico City come election day July 2. Several polls in late May showed the PRI candidate, Francisco Labastida, neck-and-neck with Vicente Fox, the nominee of the center-right National Action Party (PAN). Both the situation and the electorate are fluid, if not volatile.

Until recently, the smart money rested on Labastida, a bland, competent former governor and cabinet member. Although the average Mexican scorns the ruling party's record of ballot-box stuffing and foul play, the PRI's relatively generous welfare state and array of agricultural subsidies continue to appeal to millions of poor and working-class voters. As a consequence, Labastida entered the race with a formidable lead in the polls, despite his party's unsavory past.



"I never thought I'd say it, but this guy makes me long for the last administration."

Historically, Mexico's presidents have been handpicked by the incumbent chief executive. That changed last year with a four-candidate party primary that was open to all citizens. This procedure, promoted by sitting President Ernesto Zedillo to "consolidate democracy," offered several advantages for the much-criticized PRI: it activated the party's often creaky grassroots machinery, lofted Labastida's name recognition, and invested the nominee with much-needed legitimacy. After all, 9.7 million voters participated in the selection.

The PRI was also optimistic about Labastida's chances because of the failure of the principal opposition parties, the PAN and the leftist-nationalist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), to unite behind a single candidate.

Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive, joined the clubby PAN in 1987. He served a three-year stint in Congress and, on his second try, captured the statehouse in Guanajuato, where his family ranches and manufactures shoes. Soon after taking the oath of office, he set his sights on the presidential palace. Accustomed to berating Mexico's Tammany Hall-style system even as they cut mutually beneficial deals with PRI insiders, PAN traditionalists nevertheless considered Fox an outsider, upstart, and "Northern Barbarian." This term applies to aggressively impatient businessmen who have joined the party in the last few years and prize confrontation over compromise with a governing elite considered rotten to the core.

The physically imposing and temperamentally hard-charging fifty-seven-year-old Fox announced his candidacy for the presidency in late 1997. He immediately began barnstorming the country, making a point of wearing blue jeans, open-necked shirts, a giant "FOX" silver belt buckle, and boots that have become a trademark. He complemented this crowd-pleasing casual dress with bombastic speeches, castigating the PRI for ties to drug lords and seven decades of "a government that lies, is corrupt...[and] incompetent, and today lacks ideas and creativity." He also signed up several million members for "Amigos de Fox," a personal organization designed to raise funds, show his broad appeal,

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and pressure the skeptical PAN leadership to fall in behind him.

Ideologically there is little to choose from between Labastida's moderate neoliberal reformism and Fox's free-enterprise orientation. Fox is less conservative than his party, and has recanted his earlier talk about privatizing the state's oil monopoly. The outcome will depend on whether deeply conservative voters—six out of ten of whom claim to want "change"—will actually throw out the PRI amid steady growth and record goverment spending.

Often called the Marlboro Man because of his earthy bravado, Fox has clearly struck a chord with many Mexicans. In the nation's first televised presidential debate on April 25, he shrewdly played to the bleachers. Most observers had anticipated that the experienced, distinguished-looking Labastida would project a presidential image, shunning invective in favor of articulating sound approaches to curbing crime, improving schools, creating jobs, and broadening health-care opportunities. Instead, Labastida lashed out at his aggressive opponent for using profanity, calling Labastida "shorty" and implying that he was gay.

"My esteemed friend Señor Labastida," Fox shot back, "it may be possible for me to lose my vulgar language, but you politicians who are cheaters, who are corrupt, and have governed so badly, those characteristics you'll never lose." Morning-after polls declared Fox the hands-down winner. With the election only two months away, Labastida suddenly found himself in serious trouble.

Labastida's debate performance was only one of several self-inflicted wounds. Upon capturing his party's nomination last year, he quickly identified himself as the torchbearer for a "New PRI," committed to social justice, democracy, and crime fighting. Such rhetoric glistened in headlines and garnered praise from editorial writers abroad. At the same time, it alienated tens of thousands of party veterans, including the powerful "dinosaurs" used to playing hardball. Labastida's eagerness to embrace at least the rhetoric of reform seemed to tell the old guard, "You're not wanted in my campaign, because I can win without you."

Worse, Labastida failed to bring his PRI primary rivals into the fold, excluding many party bigshots from the list of PRI candidates for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. When the PRI controlled all thirty-one states and Mexico City, rewards abounded for the party faithful. But Mexico has increasingly modernized its political system in response to economic liberalization, with the result that today the PAN and the PRD hold ten governorships and the capital's city hall. Now, there are fewer goodies for the PRI to hand out. As a consequence, the party is racked by internecine battles and defections.

After the April 25 debate, Labastida quickly changed course. He demoted his campaign manager and sought the assistance of the PRI's most experienced "alchemists," including Manuel Bartlett, whom most analysts credit with rigging the outcome of the 1988 presidential race for the PRI. Continuing to discard his "New PRI" trappings, he urged his party's governors, army of bureaucrats, and labor bosses to beat the bushes for him. In light of the leftist PRD's strength in Mexico City and the PAN's advantage in other urban areas and in the North, the PRI's old guard is concentrating on the "*voto verde*" or countryside vote. Party apparatchiks are touting the importance of scores of PRI-initiated federal programs that serve this poverty-stricken constituency. They were given a lift on May 24 when Fox was outmaneuvered by Labastida on live TV. However, in the campaign's second debate, May 26, Fox regained his footing.

"Six out of ten Mexicans believe there will be a political crisis if the PRI loses the election," according to pollster Alejandro Moreno. "Never before in the history of Mexico have we had a peaceful transition," says Sergio Sarmiento, columnist for the daily newspaper *Reforma*. "Not in the 100 years of Aztec rule, not in 300 years of colonial rule, or 180 years of republican government."

***"Six out of ten Mexicans believe there will be a political crisis if the PRI loses the election," according to pollster Alejandro Moreno. "Never before in the history of Mexico have we had a peaceful transition," says Sergio Sarmiento, columnist for the daily newspaper* Reforma."**

In fact, a Labastida loss could pose fewer dangers than a Fox defeat. Zedillo is prepared to recognize a Fox victory. While encrusted power brokers will grouse or jet abroad, they are unlikely to challenge the authority of the chief executive, fully backed by the armed forces. If, however, electoral officials designate Labastida the next chief executive by only a couple of points, real turmoil is possible. Whether deserved or not, a narrow win by Labastida could ignite a firestorm of protests. If the PRI candidate were inaugurated, he would also face attacks from Mexico City's mayor, sniping from the media, and adverse international opinion. And despite assertions that he, like Fox, will continue to reform Mexico's economy and politics, a President Labastida would owe a whopping debt to his party's change-averse dinosaurs.

The irony of the July 2 election is that a President Fox would owe his victory to the middle class and affluent sectors that cry out for change but have prospered under Zedillo. For his part, Labastida can only win if hard-pressed workers and dirt-poor peasants, who have lost ground economically, flock to his banner. □

George W. Grayson, *who teaches government at the College of William & Mary, has just written* A Guide to the 2000 Mexican Elections, *published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

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VERMONT'S LEAHY

A public man with a passion for privacy

Dennis O'Brien

In his Vermont home—the family's longtime tree farm—U.S. Senator Patrick J. Leahy has on display only two clippings from his long political life. One, a headline from the *Rutland Herald* predicting his sure defeat in his 1974 Senate race; the other a sidebar from the *New York Times*. A reporter from the *Times* was on his way to interview the senior senator from Vermont and, as one can do in Vermont, wasn't sure which country road led to the Leahy farm. He inquired of the proverbial local perched on the front steps of a nearby house. The following conversation ensued:

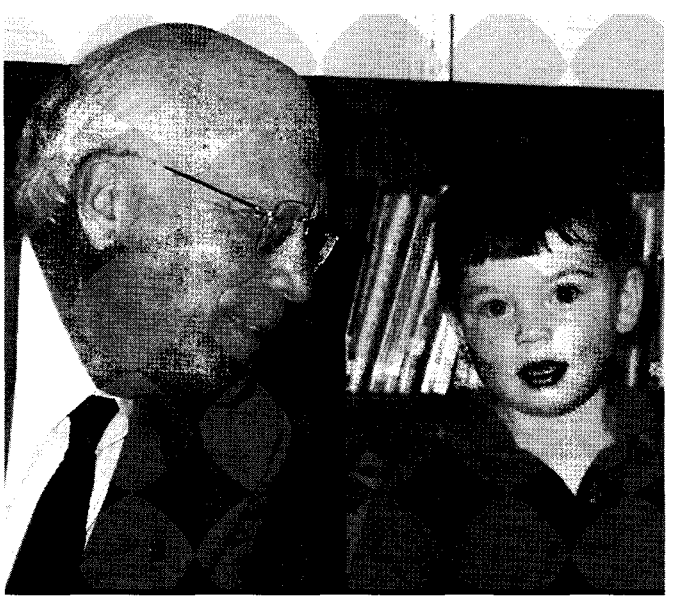
REPORTER: Does this road lead to Senator Leahy's house?
VERMONTER: You a relative of his?
REPORTER : No.
VERMONTER: You a friend of his?
REPORTER : No.
VERMONTER : You got an appointment with him?
REPORTER : No.
VERMONTER : Never heard of him!

Because Leahy is very much "at home" in Vermont, it is no wonder that the *Times* had a hard time finding him—or featuring him in its daily headlines. But you've probably seen Leahy on TV. Tall, thin-lipped, and balding, the carefully spoken liberal Democrat is a regular on news programs like PBS's "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" and ABC's "This Week."

He was not always a balding pillar of the establishment, especially not as a Democrat in a notoriously Republican state. When Leahy, now sixty, first announced his candidacy for the Senate in 1974, it was an act of considerable bravado. He was then only thirty-four, and he would be running against the revered, eighty-four-year-old Republican icon, George Aiken. Aiken, however, suddenly announced his retirement, leaving the Republican nomination to Vermont's lone member of the House of Representatives, Richard Mallary. Despite Mallary's high name recognition across the state, Leahy, then a county prosecutor, won and became the first and only Democratic senator ever elected from Vermont. He has gone on to be reelected four times, scoring a crowning victory in November 1998 when he garnered 72 percent of the vote. And there is a Vermont story in that.

Leahy's opponent in the '98 election was seventy-nine-year-old dairy farmer turned amateur actor, Fred Tuttle. Two years earlier, Tuttle had played himself in a film produced by his neighbor, John O'Brien (no relation). In the film, Tuttle decides to run for Congress: "I've spent most of my life in the barn, now it's time to spend time in the House." Tuttle trounces his stuffy, out-of-touch fictional opponent. In 1998, film nearly became fact. Jack McMullen, the Senate candidate supported by the Republican establishment, had only recently moved to Vermont. His candidacy rankled a nativist streak. O'Brien, no fan of Republicans anyhow, persuaded Fred Tuttle to run in the primary against McMullen. Tuttle, whose political views remain quite unknown to this day, trounced his opponent in a radio debate by asking, "How many teats are there on a cow?" McMullen's flunking that test led to Tuttle's 20 percent victory margin in the primary, and Leahy's subsequent margin of victory over Tuttle—who voted for him—in the general election.

Any Vermont politician had better know cows. Vermont is a dairy state, and Leahy has been indefatigable in defending local interests through such legislation as the Northeast Dairy Compact, a price floor for New England dairy farmers. He's even sponsored a law forbidding schools to sell or give away soda pop and other foods of "minimal nutri-



Canvassing a prospective voter

Dennis O'Brien, *president* emeritus *of the University of Rochester, lives in Middlebury, Vermont. His most recent book is* All the Half-Truths about Higher Education *(Chicago).* *The research and writing of this profile were funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment.*

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tional value" when federally funded lunches are being served. "Any parent knows that filling up on soda before lunch is not the way to encourage children to eat a healthy lunch," Leahy explained. Milk, went the subtext, is always the better choice. What is good for Vermont's dairy farmers, the senator is sometimes accused of thinking, is good for the nation.

If local dairy farms entrench Leahy in Vermont and New England, his work on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry demonstrates his national scope. With bipartisan support, Leahy has sponsored a wide range of nutrition, hunger-prevention, and conservation programs. For Leahy, federal efforts like the school lunch program are simple moral responsibilities. "Here we are, the richest nation in the world," he said in a recent interview, "a nation which can feed not only all its own people but export food across the world. What we throw away as garbage would feed millions. Not to provide for our own children would be just immoral."

By common designation, Leahy is a liberal. Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) consistently gives him a 90 percent or above voting approval rating. In 1995 he received 100 percent approval from ADA and 0 percent from the American Conservative Union (ACU). Still, Jeff Hollingsworth of the ACU admits that Leahy "knows where the power is and how it works. He knows what to do in a chamber that doesn't share his views."

In his Vermont campaigns the dreaded "L" word has been brandished against Leahy, but it has not stuck, for two reasons. First, Vermont Republicans are themselves quite liberal. Vermont's junior senator, Republican James Jeffords, has been a staunch supporter of such an object of conservative disdain as the National Endowment for the Arts. He has voted with the Clinton administration more than any other Republican senator. Then there is the contrast between Leahy's image and that of Vermont's lone congressman, Bernard Sanders. Bernie, as everyone calls him, is the only Independent member of the House (he sometimes claims to be a "socialist") and is everybody's image of a slightly scruffy, uncombed radical, even down to his Brooklyn accent. (Vermont does accept some transplants.) Leahy's genuine Vermont accent (several of them), height, sonorous voice, and conservative sartorial manner prevent any label of radical from sticking.

In fact, there seem to be few colleagues or political observers who are eager to find fault with Leahy. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) was amused by the very idea of there being a serious Leahy antagonist. "Well, you might try [Senator] Orrin Hatch [R-Utah]," Moynihan said, "but, on the other hand, he is a very polite Mormon."

If the "L" word defines the political "left," Leahy's "left" leanings could more accurately be resloganized: "Left alone (Yes!), left out (No!)." As one the leading privacy advocates in Congress, Leahy thinks people have a broad right to be left

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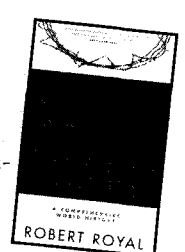

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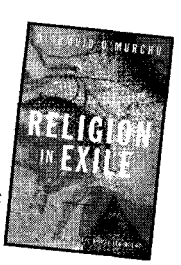

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alone; as champion of the federal school-lunch program, he wants to make sure that no one is "left out" of America's abundance. Left alone/left out has limits and there are times when the balance between the two is problematic. But they do catch the polarities of Leahy's politics, and have their roots in Leahy the Vermonter as well as Leahy the Catholic.

The right to privacy has been a theme in Leahy's career. A member of the Judiciary Committee during its hearings on the nomination of Judge Robert H. Bork to the Supreme Court, Leahy became incensed when the proposal was made that Bork's video rental records should be subpoenaed. Leahy—no supporter of Bork by a Vermont country mile—later sponsored a bill to make such records confidential. Furthermore, to assure privacy rights for health records, Leahy has frequently found himself in opposition to the Clinton administration.

A concern for individual privacy has been matched by Leahy's efforts to prevent too much "privacy" in government. He led the congressional fight for the Electronic Freedom of Information Act [EFOIA], which became law in 1996. EFOIA opens government electronic records. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Leahy said the act protects "the right of Americans to know what their government is doing—and not doing. Press releases tell us when federal agencies do something right, but [EFOIA] lets us know when they do not."

Respect for privacy also shapes the senator's defense of the legal right to abortion. As a Catholic, supporting abortion rights has not been an easy decision for Leahy, and he has been denounced from the pulpit. Ruth Charlesworth, director of the Respect Life Office for the Diocese of Burlington, and a Leahy critic, points out that "the church teaches that human life begins at the moment of conception. It deeply saddens me that Senator Leahy has not listened to the church's teaching on this matter."

Leahy, however, is not a pro-choice absolutist. He says that the *Roe* v. *Wade* ruling did not establish a right to abortion on demand. His vote to override President Bill Clinton's veto of the so-called "partial-birth" abortion bill cost Leahy the endorsement of NOW in his 1998 reelection bid. Ruth Charlesworth, among others, commends Leahy for that decision. "I am very happy that he voted for the ban on partial-birth abortion," she says. "He called it a matter of conscience."

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President Clinton has asserted that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare." Leahy says that his early experience as a state's attorney made him vividly aware of the importance of "safe." *Roe* and subsequent rulings have certainly made abortion legal. But just how "safe" is open to dispute. Helen Alvaré, spokesperson for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, notes that the number of maternal mortalities has actually risen sharply since *Roe*. Many more abortions are now performed each year, and since abortion is a lucrative business, it also attracts more dubious practitioners. As for the Vermont senator's justification of legalized abortion on privacy grounds, Alvaré expressed skepticism. How far "privacy" can justify the taking of fetal life is precisely the question, she said.

I asked Leahy whether there was anything government should do to make abortion rare. His answer was predictable, but I thought sincere. "What does society offer in the way of support services for the woman carrying the child? What's wrong with encouraging a pregnant teenager to have her child? Say 'We'll help you. We'll pay all expenses, and we have a good family for the child if that's what you want. We'll give you money to get started if you want to keep the baby.'"

He went on to recount how a couple he knew was willing to pay the costs of pregnancy for a woman who did not choose to keep her child. There could be no guarantee that the birth mother would not finally change her mind, but the couple was willing to risk it. Leahy connected the couple with a woman who wished to give up her baby. The child was born, adopted, and named "Patrick." Leahy beamed as he contemplated that outcome.

If Patrick Leahy's political polarities are privacy and care for those left out—issues on which he is willing to stand up to those both to his left and to his right—these interests have deep roots in his family's Catholic history. His mother's parents, Peter and Vincenza Zambon, were Italian immigrants who came to Vermont to find work in the granite quarries. Leahy's Irish-American father ran a printing business in Montpelier, the state capital. To the extent there are "indigenous" Catholics in Vermont, famous for its rock-ribbed Republicans and Protestants, they are largely the descendants of French Canadians who moved south during the nineteenth century in search of better farming conditions. Leahy is married to Marcelle Pomerleau, whose parents came from Quebec in the 1930s. Because Vermonters are willing to leave their neighbors alone, the Leahys, Zambons,

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and Pomerleaus have been able to thrive while freely practicing their religion. Leahy's brother-in-law, Father Claude Pomerleau, C.S.C., a professor of political science at the University of Portland (Oregon), admires Leahy's common sense and respect for law. He characterizes Leahy as a "John Courtney Murray Catholic," not a Berrigan type. "Pat is not for 'big showy things' but for the smaller, overlooked issues that can make a tremendous difference in people's lives." Pomerleau describes Leahy as an "irreverent Catholic," which seems to be standard equipment for anyone with an Irish sense of humor.

Very close to his parents and grandparents, Leahy has been particularly attentive to the Italian side, visiting the home of his very traditional Catholic grandmother in Friuli, Italy, on several occasions. "If you had to choose which kind of food you wanted, Irish or Italian—which would you pick?" he jokes. Friends and acquaintances marvel at the closeness of his relationship with Marcelle, and his fierce protectiveness toward their three children.

Leahy's sense of family fits Vermont's small-scale politics. Over the course of his tenure as a U.S. senator, Leahy figures, he has met personally about 20 percent of all Vermont voters. Senators in large states can hardly hope to meet 1 percent of their constituents. During our interview in the Russell Building, there was a fifteen-minute interlude while the senator admired a painting of a duck. The school-boy winner of an art contest, his mother, and art teacher were in Washington to receive senatorial commendation. All politics is local.

John Carr, director of the office of social justice and world peace for the United States Catholic Conference, commended Leahy for being accessible and approachable on the church's social-justice concerns. Often Leahy comes to the USCC to suggest a legislative initiative, as was the case in the senator's effort to ban land mines. Most recently, Leahy has introduced the Innocence Protection Act, designed to make DNA testing available to, and improve legal representation for, death-row inmates. "People of good conscience can and will disagree about the death penalty," Leahy says. But "we should all be able to agree that a system that may sentence one innocent person to death for every seven it executes has no place in a civilized society."

Leahy was educated in Catholic schools: Saint Michael's College in Winooski, Vermont, and Georgetown Law. The Leahy house, recalls his son Kevin, was always filled with priests and religious. A voracious reader and a fan of Teilhard de Chardin, Leahy has reread *The Phenomenon of Man* many times. Henri Nouwen has been an especially important influence. Introduced by Pomerleau, the two became close friends and Nouwen frequently led retreats at the Leahy household.

"Henri would follow me around in Washington," Leahy remembers. He would say, "You are always so busy every day with one item or another, one vote after another. Why do you do these things?"

Leahy's answer: "You only live one life. It can't be just for material comfort—I do live comfortably—but I really have wanted to have my life make a difference. There are people alive today because of me; there are people who can seek justice today because of me. When I leave here, what will they say about Pat Leahy? I want my children to be proud of what I've done, to say that I acted with integrity, that there are millions of children who have benefited from our nutrition programs, who have jobs because of what we've done."

Leahy thinks government can make a very big difference in people's lives. Republican conservatives want to "get government off our backs." Taxes are too high, regulations are too strict, and bureaucracy blocks the free energy of the economy, they say. Leahy is skeptical. He says he wishes conservatives actually believed in their own rhetoric. Instead, he notes, they want to control textbooks in the schools, "regulate everything from TV to your bedroom. I trust families to interpret values for their children."

On October 18, 1999, Leahy cast his 10,000th roll-call vote. In a history which numbers 1,851 senators, Leahy is one of only 21 to reach the 10,000 club. He has been a heavy hitter legislatively, securing laws that benefit Vermonters in the teeth of the firmest opposition. When the Northeast Dairy Compact was proposed in 1995, the House members of the Conference Committee voted 14-0 against the idea. Many of Leahy's usual allies in the Senate were also opposed. "If

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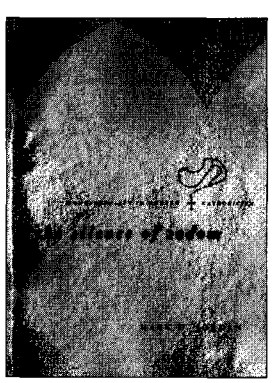

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we allow this kind of price-fixing scheme to make its way through Congress, there will be no way to prevent in a logical way any other group of states setting up similar price-fixing mechanisms under the same justification, not only in dairy but in other industry," objected Democratic Senator Herbert Kohl of Wisconsin.

Leahy, however, was determined to help rescue Vermont's farmers. As it happened, Bob Dole was running for president and he wanted a farm bill, but the Democrats were prepared to filibuster the GOP version. Republican Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, also aspiring to the presidency, made an appearance at Vermont's Saint Albans Dairy Co-op and saw Leahy's bill as a way into the hearts and votes of New England farmers. Having recruited Lugar to the cause, Leahy mustered enough Democrats to break the filibuster in exchange for Dole's support of the dairy compact. Overnight the vote was reversed.

"The milk story shows that Leahy knew how to play the game," says Peter Eisner, managing director of The Center for Public Integrity in Washington, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that examines public service and ethics-related issues with an eye to how money influences politics. "It's one of thousands of cases you could point out in which a member of Congress does something for an interest group which would end, in this case, helping a constituency affected [by] the price consumers pay for a product," Eisner says. "So milk prices went up and the dairy farmers in Vermont were happy. Our overall question is, how do the special-interest deals congressmen make help the public interest? What's the difference between special interest and the public interest? It's clear that [Leahy is] a participant in a system in which people have access to him who have money and want influence. They're trading on that in return for things that may not help people." Vermonters, of course, argue that preserving the state's dairy farms is as much a conservation issue as a consumer issue.

What should one think of Leahy's tending so assiduously to Vermont's cows and pork? The senator notes that when he first came to Washington he was very much opposed to the seniority system. Not surprisingly, the longer he has stayed in office, the more he has come to like it. For all its problems and for all the idiosyncrasies of the pork barrel, if you represent a state with a population of only half a million, seniority and the clout to effect special-interest legislation create a certain rough balance of power. In a demographic showdown, California would get all the government largesse. Leahy's seniority gives Vermont some leverage.

Needless to say, providing pork often comes with a little senatorial sleight of hand. In 1998, for example, Leahy attached a rider to a bill designating Vermont's Lake Champlain one of the Great Lakes. The intent of the designation was to make the University of Vermont eligible for research funds on issues like pollution and keeping out the lampreys. Midwestern senators eventually awakened to this piece of geographical legerdemain and demanded its reversal. But Vermont's senior senator rarely comes away from such negotiations empty-handed. Lake Champlain lost its designation as a "Great Lake" but not before the University of Vermont received a $1 million research grant.

A person of ready humor, Leahy routinely makes allies everywhere and even has friends across the Senate's most contested battle lines. But the search for compromise has gotten harder over the years. "When I came here [in 1975] the country was very much at risk and the Senate was in good bipartisan shape," Leahy has lamented. "Today the country is doing very well, and we sometimes break down too much along party lines. Those of us who have served here a

Ritual Pantoum for Changing the Aquarium

Return this urchin underneath the sea;
Unhouse the hermit crab, the shut-in snail;
Pour forth this stir of cells to simply be,
And haul up fresh salt water in a pail.

Unhouse the hermit crab, the shut-in snail,
And muse upon their tracings as they're made.
When hauling up salt water in a pail,
Step carefully around them where they fade.

Ponder over tracings as they're made,
And read for meaning that meandering.
Step carefully beyond them as they fade
Into the passing shadow of a wing.

Read for meaning that meandering,
For bits of weathered shell buried in sand.
Upon the passing shadow of a wing
The hours bring their currency to hand.

Like bits of weathered shell buried in sand,
Or bells invisible among the isles,
The hours bring their currency to hand
Washed by a sun the polished stone beguiles.

The bells invisible among the isles
Pour forth this stir of cells to simply be,
Washed by a sun the tumbled stone beguiles.
Return this urchin underneath the sea.

Alfred Nicol

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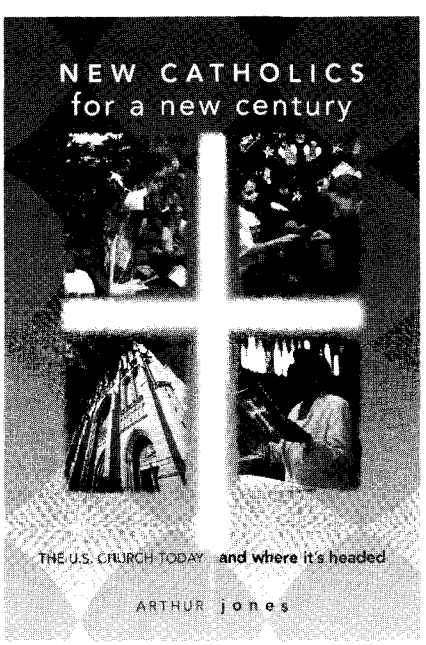
long time know it does not have to be that way."

Leahy blames much of the problem on the high cost of campaigning. "People ask how's this going to affect the special-interest group that's going to get my fund-raising letter tomorrow. It's scarier than hell," he says. One advantage of being a Vermont senator is that big money is not such a factor. George Aiken is famous for having spent $17.06 during his final campaign—for postcards he sent thanking people who had bothered to put up posters on his behalf. The cost has gone up. Leahy had $1 million in his war chest for the '98 campaign, a large amount for Vermont but Aiken-sized for most senatorial contests. (Criticized in his 1992 campaign because 96 percent of his campaign funds came from out of state and because he had just voted for a 25 percent Senate pay raise, Leahy has since forsworn PAC money and has never again voted for a pay raise.)

Over and above his interest in nutritional standards, protection of privacy, open government, and his loyalty to constituents, Leahy considers his work to ban the use of land mines his most important achievement. In 1989, Congress passed the "Leahy War Victims Fund," a $5 million annual program to aid war victims. (It has grown to $15 million.) The fund has been used to provide artificial limbs for land-mine survivors. In 1992, Leahy secured a one-year moratorium on the export of antipersonnel mines; this was extended for three years the following year. A series of technical changes to the weapons (so that they would self-destruct) has also been advanced. Moratoriums were reimposed on export and use. Leahy's efforts have also had international consequences. In December 1997, 122 nations signed the Ottawa Convention, banning the production, transfer, use, and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines, and pledged to remove existing mine fields in ten years. (The United States abstained in the UN vote, but indicated it would restrict mine use and promised to stop it altogether by 2006.)

Leahy is known as a man of strong emotions, emotions that affect his person and his policies in complex ways. He commutes home almost every weekend. "This is the place where I feel most at home. I can fly up and take off my twelve-piece suit, put on my jeans, and look at that guy Leahy on the tube and tell him to snap it up." Then he is off to something like the Franklin County Dairy Co-op. Longtime observers admire his formidable political persona. He works the crowd one-on-one and ends up as a master of ceremonies raffling off feed, farm equipment, and maple syrup. He knows everybody's name. He is such a presence in person and on the platform that one wonders whether one can get to the private man behind the practiced politician. Like so many of his fellow Vermonters, guarding what is private is a personal and political passion for Leahy. But that passion has served the citizens of Vermont and the nation well. □



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Rand Richards Cooper

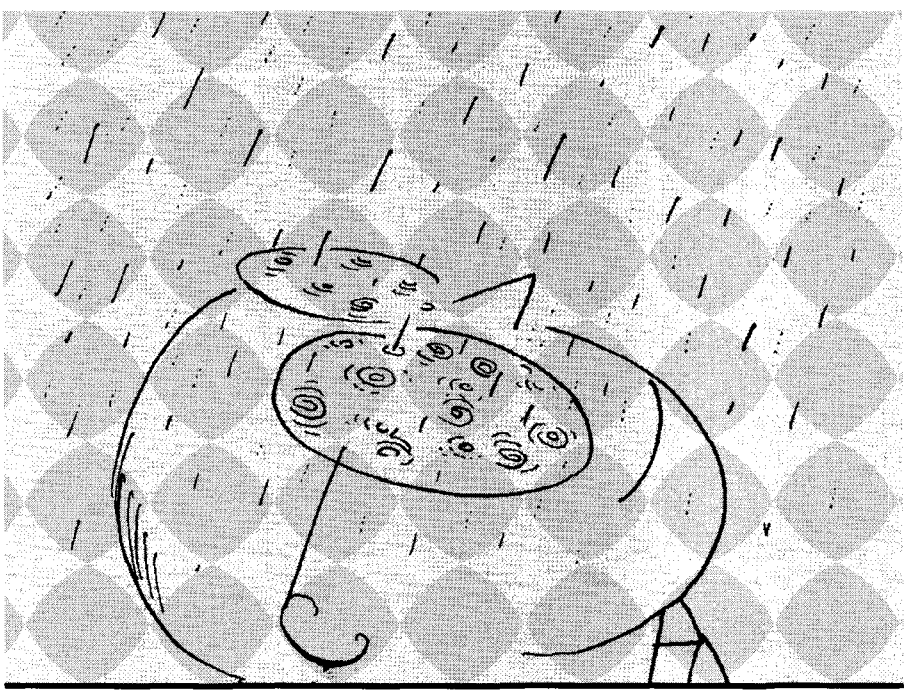
A BLIND BOY WHO SEES

'The Color of Paradise'

There's a hauntingly beautiful scene at the start of *The Color of Paradise*, Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi's luminous trip into the world of an eight-year-old blind boy. While waiting for his father on a bench outside his special-needs school, the boy, Mohammad (Mohzen Ramezani), hears the frantic squawk of a tiny bird in the woods behind him. He follows the sound, groping on hands and knees through leaves to find the lost chick. Then, still navigating by ear, he locates the bird's tree, climbs up, and returns the fledgling to its nest alongside chirping siblings. Afterward, exhausted but happy, Mohammad doesn't realize that his father has arrived to pick him up, and is watching. We do, though, and what we see revealed on the father's face isn't love or pride, but rather the grim weariness of a man who views his son as a burden.

Rife with symbolism, taking aim unabashedly at the deepest pathos, *The Color of Paradise* offers an evocation of childhood reminiscent of Truffaut, or Lasse Hallström's *My Life as a Dog*. The film works with a meditative, visually poetic style that requires—and rewards—a certain patience in a viewer. This is the kind of cinematic experience that reminds you why taking a break from American movies is so good for your health. It's quiet and slow and utterly thrilling.

Majidi's lone previous film to be distributed in the United States, *Children of Heaven*, chronicled Tehran's poor through the tale of a brother and sister and a lost pair of sneakers. *The Color of Paradise* turns to the countryside, narrating a poignant family conflict centered on Mohammad's widowed father, Hashem (Hosein Mahjoob), a peasant farmer and charcoal burner. Overwhelmed by his responsibilities, including caring for two little daughters and an aged mother, Hashem is headed toward middle age alone, and he's afraid. Having set all his hopes on marrying the daughter of a local wealthy man, he's desperately intent on putting his best self forward, and frantic to think that something might get in his way—including Mohammad. Hashem's rejection of the boy is part visceral revulsion at vulnerability, but also a shamed and superstitious feeling that as long as he has a handicapped son, he's going to be a loser. Who will marry a man with a blind son? The thought knocks him back again and again into the depths of an agonized selfishness. "Can't you keep him?" he pleads with the director of the school in Tehran, as the boy waits outside.



Majidi refrains from reducing the father to simple villainy—we pity him for his loneliness, we sense his guilt concerning his son—but he's in the grip of dreadful temptations. In a quietly shocking scene at the charcoal-burning site, Mohammad wanders off toward the deep woods, and Hashem, pretending not to notice, lets him go. A co-worker steers the boy back, but by then we've seen the father's darkest wishes revealed; and what's more, so has he.

The Color of Paradise is an overtly religious movie, rich in spiritual implications that fit easily into a Christian framework. Hashem recognizes the evil in himself; but with no basis for acting other than a raging sense of life's unfairness, he cannot free himself from it. Self-knowledge unredeemed by faith and love is worse than a tragedy, Majidi is saying, or perhaps less than one: it's a nightmare, a battle with demons that the demons will win. When Hashem apprentices the boy to a tradesman in a distant town who works with the blind, and his mother—a piously religious woman—reproaches him, he rails against her God, a blast of despair and self-pity from which the mother recoils in dismay. Does she want him to go get Mohammad? he shouts at her, finally; is that what she is after? "I'm not worried about Mohammad," she answers, quietly. "I'm worried about you."

And worry she should. With his dark clothes and gloomy face, his cramped and smoldering emotions, Hashem resides spiritually in one of those charcoal-burning hovels where he toils his days away; he lives in a world without color. The blind Mohammad, on the other hand, sees in brilliant tones of joy. Though he can't see the threads his grandmother and sis-

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ters dip in boiling vats of wildflower dye, nimbly he sorts out the threads of the audible world: music and a warbling dove in a Tehran shop; a cat's low yowl; the tumbling rush of a brook. Riding a bus with his father, he reaches his hand out the open window. "I want to catch the wind," he says. Hashem, lost in his troubles, pays no attention; but we understand perfectly the reality of Mohammad's life, with its never-ending quest to grasp the invisible.

Majidi and his director of photography, Mohammad Davoodi, have filled *The Color of Paradise* with sumptuous, *Sound of Music*-style panoramas of the Iranian countryside: meadows brilliant with wildflowers, a line of trees atop a hillside, swaying seas of alfalfa. These broad vistas alternate with close studies of Mohammad's hands, irrepressibly exploring everything—plants, a stream, his grandmother's lined face. "God is not visible," he says, repeating the words of a teacher at his school. "You can see him through your fingertips."

What's so winning about *The Color of Paradise* is that it works both as spiritual parable and as a richly detailed, specifically imagined human story. The religious meanings are there for the taking—the blindness of a life without God, the beauties of a larger realm invisible to us all—and yet the film never loses its grasp on vivid human actuality. As Mohammad, Mohzen Ramezani, himself obviously blind, wears an oversized grin and incongruous, movie-star sunglasses, and when his face puckers into a sob, it's heart-wrenching.

Steering father and son toward their respective fates, *The Color of Paradise* proceeds with the clarity and inevitability of fable, striking hardly a false note until the very end, when Majidi attempts a closing visual gesture sure to strike some as sentimental and intrusive. To me it seemed simply unnecessary, an attempt to deliver too literally a feat the previous ninety minutes of joy and sorrow had already wonderfully pulled off: letting us see the hand of God at work in the ceaselessly active hands of a brave blind boy. □

Rand Richards Cooper *is the author of* The Last to Go *and* Big as Life.

STAGE

Celia Wren

THE IDEA'S THE THING

'Copenhagen' & 'The Real Thing'

Science has escaped from its ghetto, at least here in Manhattan, where laboratory-minted ideas and images are gaining ever wider currency. The theater scene, in particular, has been awash in theorems. Off Broadway, no fewer than three new dramas about mathematics opened in April and May, while the ambitious Ensemble Studio Theater was wheeling through its second season devoted to drama about science. On Broadway, audiences were flocking to Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, about the German physicist Werner Heisenberg and his "uncertainty principle."

Heisenberg (1901–76) is not exactly a newcomer to the footlights, or to culture in general. Modern writers have been fascinated with the uncertainty principle, which states, roughly, that at quantum level (that is, where things get really, really small), you can know either the position or the velocity of a particle, but not both. Heisenberg's principle and related quantum truths also imply that by observing a particle, you interfere with it. "The act of observing determines the reality," as Tom Stoppard explained in *Hapgood*, his 1988 spoof about spies and quantum mechanics.

Stoppard and other authors, including Thomas Pynchon, have mined quantum physics for metaphorical resonance, sometimes just in passing. Chicago-based playwright Penny Penniston recently produced *now then again*, a play touching on some of the same issues as *Copenhagen*. The British journal *New Theatre Quarterly* has even run a series of articles discussing the theatricality of the uncertainty principle and corollary axioms.

To the thoughtful person, after all, quantum mechanics seems to provide a welcome alternative to more deterministic science. In the clockwork universe outlined by Newton and his followers, one can (theoretically) calculate, and hence predict, everything. Much modern biology seems to rule out free will, while some biomedical research demonstrates (it may appear) that our ideas and feelings are chemically preprogrammed. The work of Heisenberg and colleagues like Niels Bohr, by contrast, seems to argue for choice—for the mystery of things. Moreover, by attributing an uncanny meaning to human perception, quantum physics reassures us of our own importance. "We put man back at the center of the universe," Heisenberg boasts in *Copenhagen*.

In Frayn's no-nonsense drama of ideas, such lines volley back and forth with all

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the subtlety of an artillery barrage—though, to be fair, the narrative premise hardly invites casual chat. Heisenberg (the ever-imposing Michael Cumpsty), Bohr (Philip Bosco), and Bohr's wife Margrethe (Blair Brown) are supposedly meeting after death to hash out the secrets of the past—in particular, to pin down exactly what happened in 1941 when Heisenberg, then a prominent scientist in Nazi Germany, visited Bohr in occupied Denmark. Controversy has swirled around this historical episode ever since. Was Heisenberg, as he later claimed, trying to rally Bohr and other physicists to boycott A-bomb development on moral grounds? Bohr, who fled Denmark in 1943 and eventually worked at Los Alamos, asserted, on the contrary, that his former protégé had been fishing for information to aid the German cause. Subsequent research into the Nazi bomb-building project, vastly inferior to its Allied counterpart, has generated still more questions. Did Heisenberg make a series of scientific blunders? Or did he deliberately steer research in the wrong direction?

Copenhagen wrests these possibilities, and their philosophical implications, into a maze of metaphysics. Over the course of two hours, Frayn's characters re-enact variations on the 1941 episode, while the script draws innumerable parallels to the uncertainty principle. Hard facts vanish into the haze of memory—Bohr's and Heisenberg's recollections do not agree—so there's no certitude there. Moral choices seem ambiguous—Heisenberg is torn between patriotism and broader compassion for the human race. And the human character proves as elusive as any quantum particle: the reserved Margrethe, who observes the two men with near-scientific attentiveness, cannot tell whether the German scientist is a friend or a traitor. And he may not know himself—no human being, *Copenhagen* suggests, can be sure of his or her own motives.

Michael Blakemore's production offers few distractions to this intellectual tug-of-war. The three actors turn in faultless performances, managing to suggest, through voice and sheer presence, both intellectual rigor and determination to battle existential terror. But they spend most of the play standing ramrod straight, gazing at each other across a wooden arena whose simplicity suggests a laboratory's sterility. Startlingly, around a dozen audience members are actually seated at the rear of the stage, looking down on the action from a ledge in the wooden backdrop; the arrangement might allude—yet again—to quantum physics, emphasizing the eerie significance of observing.

Observing *Copenhagen* itself may thrill well-rested viewers with academic hankerings and excellent powers of concentration, but the play's relentless cerebral forays can also be frustrating. Frayn treats his play like a kind of theatrical subcompact, getting maximum mileage from the uncertainty principle while the story dwindles in the rear-view mirror. The imbalance becomes all the more obvious if one compares Frayn's work with another idea-heavy drama playing a few blocks away: Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, last seen on Broadway in 1984.

Uncertainty abounds

In Stoppard's captivating study of love, thought melds seamlessly with narrative and character development. When the successful playwright Henry (Stephen Dillane) rants about writing ("Words...[are] innocent, neutral, precise...but when they get their corners knocked off, they're no good any more"), for example, his ideas flesh out his personality, and, by explaining the alienation of his dimwitted actress wife, Annie (Jennifer Ehle), pave the way for future plot twists. *The Real Thing* is Stoppard at his best, and this marvelous revival, which features splendid performances by Nigel Lindsay and Sarah Woodward, as well as Ehle and the brilliant Dillane, pays the script full tribute. Directed by David Leveaux, the production reminds you just how scintillating a drama of ideas can be.

Stoppard's scripts sparkle because he sports with ideas. Even when the thought is dizzyingly complex (*Hapgood*) or existentially terrifying (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), the scenes that contain it have a disarming game-like spirit. In comparison, a work like *Copenhagen*, firing off its scientific references so intently, seems formidable and strained.

Plays-of-ideas that, like Stoppard's creations, really play, operate under a sort of aesthetic uncertainty principle—a willingness to entertain a large number of diverse, and sometimes contradictory concepts, without clinging to any one too long. Such an open-minded approach recalls Keats's 1817 theory of negative capability—"when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Quantum physics, on the other hand, allows modern writers to flirt with this attractive state of being, without actually committing themselves to it. With Heisenberg around, you can champion uncertainty and mystery, then blame it all on science. □

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Summer reading

Laurence Breiner

Laurence Breiner teaches English and African American studies at Boston University. He is the author of An Introduction to West Indian Poetry *(Cambridge University Press).*

It's when you start packing that you realize how many different modes of summer reading there are, all requiring different kinds of books. Summer's not just a day at the beach. There's reading for the rainy days. There's reading to accompany the morning's first coffee, when the birds are up but the houseguests aren't. There's insomniac reading (when the houseguests are still up). You need a little plan. I've tried several. My worst plan was to read books with the word "beach" in the title. Much more successful was the summer of nothing but plays. An equally rewarding variation reveals the underlying principle: Read no book of more than 130 pages.

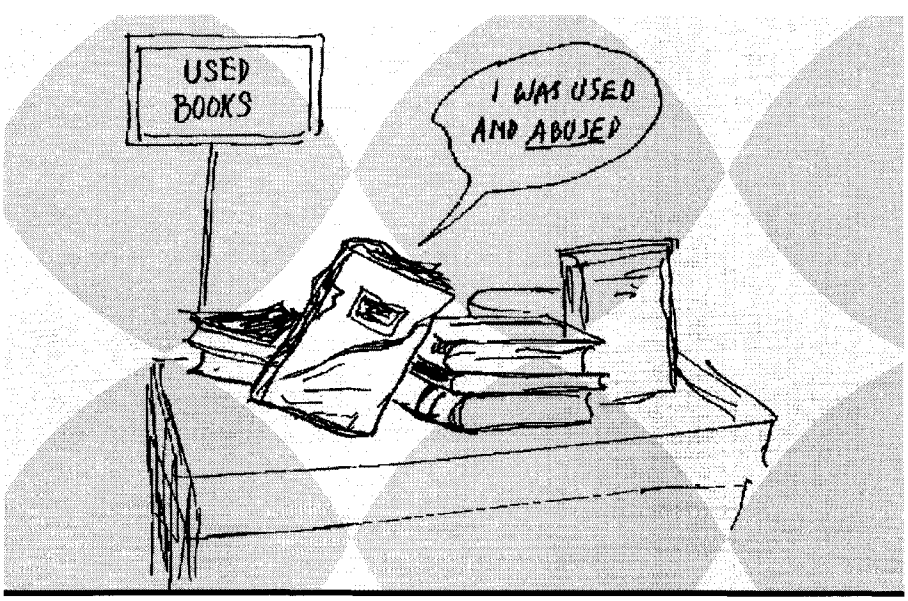
But tradition strongly associates the lazy days of summer with wildly ambitious reading. Not hard books—fat books. It's the season for the really good Dickens they didn't tell you about in school: *Dombey and Son*, and *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. The nearest contemporary equivalent must be Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (HarperCollins, $20)—1,300 pages of beautiful sentences, inhabited by a subcontinent of quirky and memorable characters. A truth universally acknowledged initiates the story: Mrs. Mehra needs a husband for her youngest. The search soon embroils four large families, and the political upheavals of India in the 1950s intrude unpredictably. This is leisurely reading, but not leisurely telling. The texture is opulent and detailed, the big crowd scenes are wonderfully managed, and the whole story is full of incident without melodrama—an amazing feat, considering the political background, which several other big novels of India are content to rely upon in lieu of a plot.

Considerably shorter, but compensating with greater metaphysical weight, is Georges Perec's masterpiece, *Life: A User's Manual* (Godine, $19.95, 600 pp.). It is accurate, but hardly adequate, to say that Perec weaves together the stories of the people living in a large apartment building in Paris, told from the perspective of a single moment. In the reading, you will discover a novel full of puzzles and conundrums, with an emotional and intellectual density comparable to that of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Red*, *White*, and *Blue* trilogy.

For a homegrown product on a similar scale, you could hardly do better than *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (Harcourt Brace, $15, 648 pp.). Here are more than forty pieces that never sound alike, though all abundantly demonstrate Welty's genius: her characteristic agility of imagination, the striking variety of her light, the polyphony of pitch-perfect American voices.

Summer is also the time to try to remember all those books friends once mentioned with a special note in their voices. Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (Noonday Press, $12, 219 pp.) hardly needs to be remembered, since almost everyone mentions it, but since hardly anyone can explain why it is so fine, you have to read it for yourself. Imagine a haunting novel, in gorgeous sinewy prose, about two young sisters and a vagrant aunt who live beside an Idaho lake with a train wreck at the bottom.

Here are some others: Alan Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue* (Viking Penguin, $10.95, 256 pp.), a funny and moving book about Jewish octogenarians who undertake, against the odds, to stage *Hamlet* at the Emma Lazarus retirement home. Egos! Passions! History! For a different kind of endgame, Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* (HarperCollins, $11, 219 pp.), set in postnuclear



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South Florida, tells a freakish coming-of-age story garnished with a feral symphony orchestra, errant Rastas, and a catch phrase that deserves a place in everyone's vocabulary: "Never happen. No way. Chance in Hell." Another sublimely goofy novel is Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (Buccaneer, $18.95). A clue to how much fun this is: there's a film version, by effects-meister George Pal, with Tony Randall hamming it up as the Chinese impresario.

Chang-Rae Lee's debut, *Native Speaker* (Riverhead Books, $12.95, 349 pp.), is a moody and devious novel, which only appears to be a political thriller. There is, yes, a story about a political campaign in an Asian district of New York City, but it comes to us narrated by a twenty-something Korean-American who is by profession a sort of metaphysical hit man. The result fully deserves the occasional reviewer's comparisons to Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Random House, $19.95, 616 pp.). On the subject of appearances, there's also George Schuyler's Harlem Renaissance classic, *Black No More* (Northeastern, $13.95, 222 pp.). This sardonic tale about the social impact of a scientific breakthrough that turns black people white is so wonderfully wicked you can never admit you've read it. Bring it to a sparsely populated beach. After all, it's about the opposite of tanning.

But really, what goes in the straw basket with the sunscreen and the big towels? For total immersion (so to speak) you need pack nothing more than Robert Fitzgerald's translation of *The Odyssey* (Farrar Strauss & Giroux, $10, 528 pp.) and Derek Walcott's salty Caribbean epic *Omeros* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, $12, 325 pp.). Worried about being seen reading books whose text lies mostly left of center? Well, there are those who say that the only essential reading, every summer of your life, is Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (Harcourt Brace, $11, 209 pp.).

who are we?

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Suzanne Berne

Suzanne Berne's novel, A Crime in the Neighborhood *(Algonquin Books), won the 1999 Orange Prize for fiction.*

There are a few books I've read three or four times, and plan to read again. These are the books I hoard, that I'm reluctant to lend when a visitor wanders into my study requesting a book for summer vacation. But usually altruism and a certain evangelical impulse get the better of me. "Well, if you want something really good," I say, then pull my favorites from the bookshelves and begin describing them with such enthusiasm that I generally succeed in persuading my visitor not to borrow a book from me after all. But now and then someone perseveres, and these days the book that gets carried away is likely to be Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (Houghton Mifflin, $12, 225 pp.).

Set in eighteenth-century Saxony, this novel focuses on the true story of Fritz von Hardenberg, a student of philosophy and trainee clerk in the Directorate of Salt Mines, who is destined to be-

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come the poet Novalis. Brilliant, voluble, kindhearted Fritz is beloved by his enormous, eccentric family and his circle of intellectual friends (which includes Schlegel and Goethe). All of them are stunned when he falls deeply in love with a twelve-year-old named Sophie. The girl is not very bright (she can't spell Fritz's last name, for instance), nor very pretty, and yet Fritz loves her to distraction, calls her his "spirit guide" and his "philosophy," and plans to marry her.

What makes this strange, ironic novel so compelling is Fitzgerald's genius for detail—every page offers marvelously precise information about eighteenth-century German life—and also her genius for pronouncements on the human condition, which are never anything less than startling yet always seem true. For instance, on Christmas Day, Fritz's gloomy, pious old father is instructed by the director of a Moravian religious order to remember that Christmas is a day of joy and to accept that joy as would a child. "The Brethren were experienced in joy," Fitzgerald writes dryly, "and perhaps sometimes forgot what a difficult emotion it is, and how unfamiliar to many."

Short-story collections by Alice Munro and William Trevor share a similar blend of microscopically precise detail and cosmic insights into the human heart. Munro's characters mostly live in Canada, Trevor's in Ireland. Munro writes about women, many of whom live in unlovely provincial villages and are pining for scenes of vitality that they themselves embody. Although I'm partial to them all, my favorite of Munro's collections is her first, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (NAL-Dutton, $11.95, 244 pp.). Trevor's characters, too, frequently find themselves in rural outposts, beset by family obligations, stymied, yearning for a wider life. Both writers focus on the unexpected, piercing moments of revelation that strike people who think they have been living ordinary lives, until suddenly they realize the hidden, perverse patterns that have been guiding them.

Various friends have tried to borrow Trevor's novel, *Other People's Worlds* (Viking Penguin, $9.95, 240 pp.). It's the

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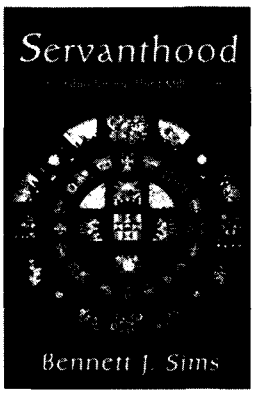

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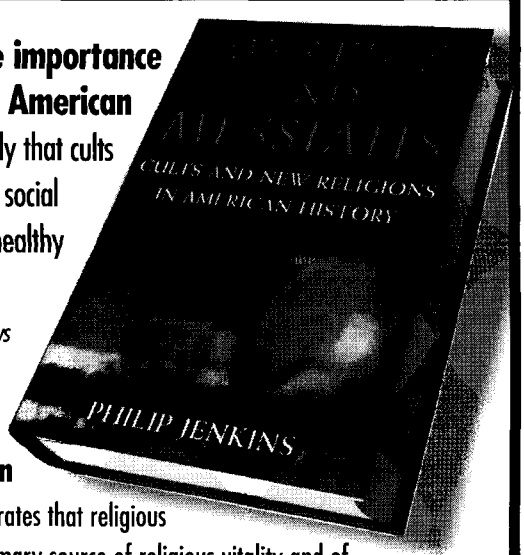

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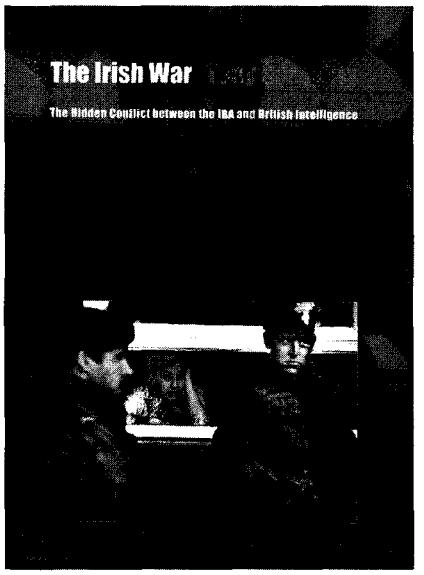

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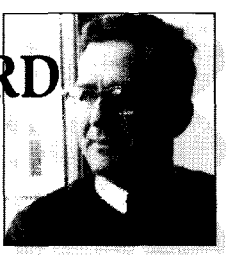

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story of three people with dramatically different lives who are nevertheless intricately connected. Two of the characters are betrayed and abandoned by the third, and yet he does not inspire hatred, neither in them nor the reader. This man's identity—he is an actor who occasionally appears in tobacco commercials on television—is so ephemeral and compliant that to hate him would be like hating one of your own fantasies. The triumph of this particular novel is that it never loses a strangely tender comic sympathy toward its characters no matter how dark and limited their worlds come to seem.

Another favorite, William Maxwell's fictionalized memoir, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (Random House, $10, 160 pp.), is one of those slender novels that grow large and luminous, occupying far more imaginative territory than its modest size suggests. Set in the Midwest in the 1920s, the novel follows a boy whose mother has died in the 1918 flu epidemic, as he navigates his grief and loneliness and his father's remarriage alongside the unfolding of a tragic small-town scandal, which involves the family of a boy he knows slightly. So delicate is the interweaving of these two seemingly separate stories that you don't realize how profoundly they're related until the last page.

Surprising relationships occur again in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (Picador, $13, 230 pp.) which lyrically links the lives of Virginia Woolf and two modern women. I was astonished by this book, particularly by the unexpected insight Cunningham offers into what consoles us in our daily human struggles. It's so modest, and so convincing, simply "an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) know these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more."

So many of those hours come while reading, don't they? No wonder I hoard my books.

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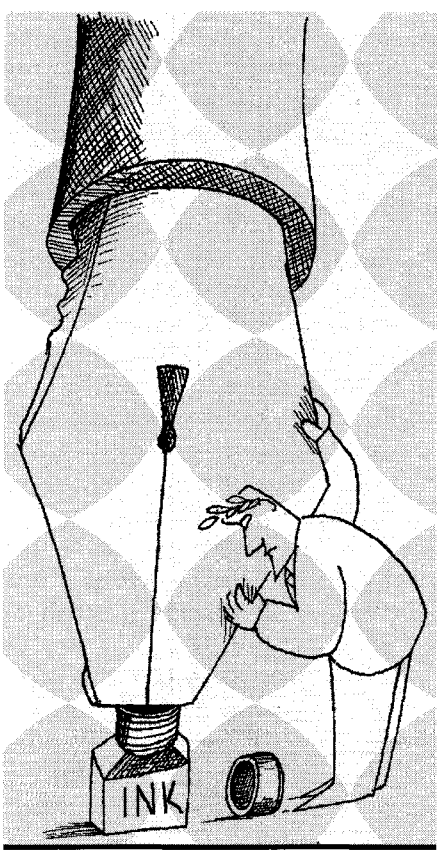
Madeline Marget

Madeline Marget is a frequent contributor to Commonweal.

Each of the fifteen interviews that make up *Conversations with Reynolds Price* (Mississippi, $15.95, 294 pp.) evokes a slightly different man, one sometimes off-puttingly sure, but also one whose experience, observations, talent, and faith are instructive and companionable. Readers already familiar with Price's work can learn something of the sources and authorial purpose behind his books. People who haven't read Price's memoirs and fiction can still find out about one especially articulate writer's transformation of actual, imaginative, and spiritual life into works of art.

We discover, for example, that Kate Vaiden, the title-character of his perhaps best-known novel, partly depicts an alternate life for Price's beloved mother, while Hutch Mayfield, the protagonist of Price's trilogy (*The Surface of the Earth*,



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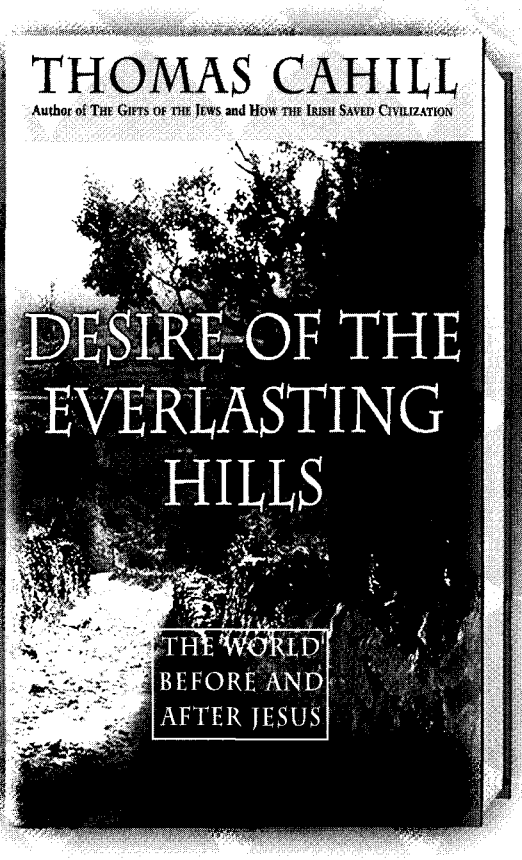
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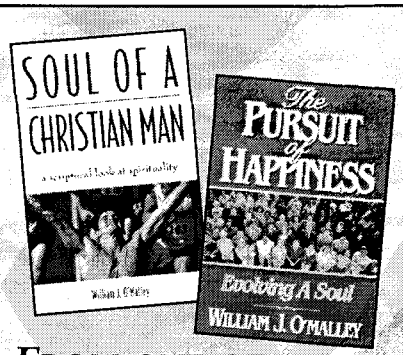

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The Source of Light, and *The Promise of Rest*) shares something of his creator's devotion to his father. Price's description of literary art and of his participation in it, however, is the distinctive achievement of this collection. "When Lear comes out with Cordelia dead in his arms and his whole life ruined and his kingdom lost, he says that very desolate line, 'Never, never, never, never, never.' But if you listen at the line carefully, it's a line of regular trochaic pentameter. It's not a line of someone saying, 'Baa ooh ska, tragedy oy vey!'... Literature is not a slice of life, and it shouldn't be....Literature shows us life in a far more organized and controlled way, so that we can begin to attempt to understand it in a way that we can't hope to understand the chaos of the world that just comes at us raw all day long like a hawk flying at our eyes."

"One must do the truth to grasp its meaning," Edward Cell writes in his excellent introduction to *Daily Readings from Quaker Spirituality* (Templegate, $4.95, 96 pp.). Quakers, he emphasizes, are communal, Christian, mystical, and always concerned with making the world better in the present.

Cell's selection of readings starts with George Fox in 1660 and ends with Anonymous in 1970, packing three centuries of wisdom, insight, love of God and of all human beings into less than seventy-five pages. Political engagement, holy in the Quaker context, is a theme throughout. "In Friends' meetings also, from the fact that everyone is free to speak, one hears harmonies and correspondences between various utterances such as are scarcely to be met elsewhere," Caroline Stephen wrote in 1890. Rufus Jones urges Friends to spread good through "personal contagion," in the manner of Christ. Later, during the 1930s, he wrote that "to withdraw from the human press and struggle and seek only the selfish thrill of individual salvation is the way of spiritual danger." All the readings are infused with passion and sincerity, part of which comes from the quiet toughness of dedicated and determined lives. *Daily Readings from Quaker Spirituality* is part of a twenty-volume series; I plan to embark immediately on *Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich*.

Ernest Gaines's novel *A Lesson before Dying* (Vintage, $12, 256 pp.) fulfills Price's standards and exemplifies those of Quakerism. In segregated and racist mid-twentieth-century Louisiana, Jefferson, a young black man, is convicted of a murder he didn't commit and is sentenced to die in the electric chair. This looming death is terrible. Even more damaging to Jefferson is his lawyer's defense. Jefferson cannot be guilty, the lawyer argues, because he is less than human. He isn't capable of thought. He is an animal—a hog. Naive and vulnerable, Jefferson believes him.

It falls to Grant Wiggins, the novel's narrator and the local school teacher, to visit Jefferson in prison and to counsel him, so that he will die with self-respect, spiritually upright even in the face of fatal oppression. Grant does so reluctantly, at the urgent behest of his aunt, Jefferson's godmother, and a local preacher. At first, the visits are miserable and troubling. Jefferson refuses to talk to Grant, and, in a particularly disturbing passage, he eats food out of a bag without using his hands, as if he really were a hog. He shows little of his own humanity, and no pride. Meanwhile, Jefferson's plight and person increasingly influence the community—those in the black "quarter," and, to some extent, whites. In one vivid scene and true characterization after another, and through a narrative of tremendous velocity, Gaines explores the journey to Jefferson's death.

The compassion and commitment Grant finds through his relationship with Jefferson overwhelm—or nearly so—the bitterness and anger that dominated him at the beginning of the novel. In turn, Jefferson gradually goes from silence to expressing his feeling for the beauty of life, his dread at losing it, and his love for other people. Finally, he says he'll go, like Jesus, "without a mumbling word." *A Lesson before Dying* is Gaines's retelling of the Passion—a layered and sensual story of a suffering man and his life-changing struggle.

None of these books has many pages. All three can easily fit in a backpack if you're hiking, or the satchel you carry on the subway. Or on your porch table, along with the lemonade. Keep them all at hand.

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Daniel Terris

Daniel Terris is director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University.

Saving the world is a dangerous business—especially for those whom we are trying to save. We spend a lot of time castigating ourselves for our indifference in the face of suffering. But some of our sharpest contemporary writers warn us that we should spend more of our moral capital on considering the consequences of the "good" that we do attempt.

Michael Ignatieff's *Virtual War* (Henry Holt, $23, 246 pp.) brings a reflective journalist's eye to the ongoing crisis in Kosovo. Ignatieff was and remains a strong hawk in the Balkans, a card-carrying member of the something-must-be-done brigade. Like other observers who covered the siege of Sarajevo and the ravages of the war in Bosnia, Ignatieff brought to the later conflict in Kosovo a conviction that this time the Western powers should intervene early and forcefully to counter Slobodan Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing. *Virtual War* contains admiring profiles of diplomat Richard Holbrooke, NATO commander Wesley Clark, and UN prosecutor Louise Arbour—people, in Ignatieff's view, willing to take a hard line against Serbian violence. Supporters of human rights, Ignatieff tells us, need to get over their skittishness about military power.

Ignatieff's prescriptions will not satisfy everyone. NATO's bombing campaign inflicted its own damage on Serbians and Kosovars alike, and people will be arguing for a long time about whether military intervention exacerbated the conflict or provided an important check on Serbian power.

The real value of *Virtual War*, however, lies not in its prescription but in Ignatieff's probing analysis of the ethics of intervention—the consequences not for the Serbs or the Kosovars, but for the Western nations who were willing

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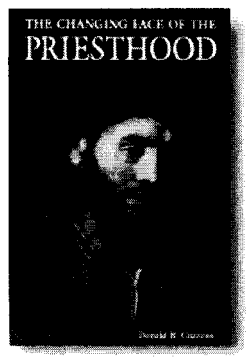

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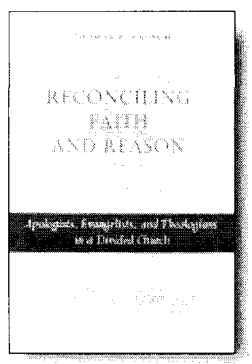

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to wage an essentially gutless war. Kosovo involved a new kind of warfare: it required little mobilization or solidarity of purpose among the general population; lawyers monitored the military targets; precision bombing provided the illusion that intervention was not harming "ordinary" citizens; and protecting the lives of NATO soldiers was a higher priority than achieving military ends. The Kosovo war was "virtual" not only because it was fought on computer screens, but because the Western commitment to its goals was so shallow.

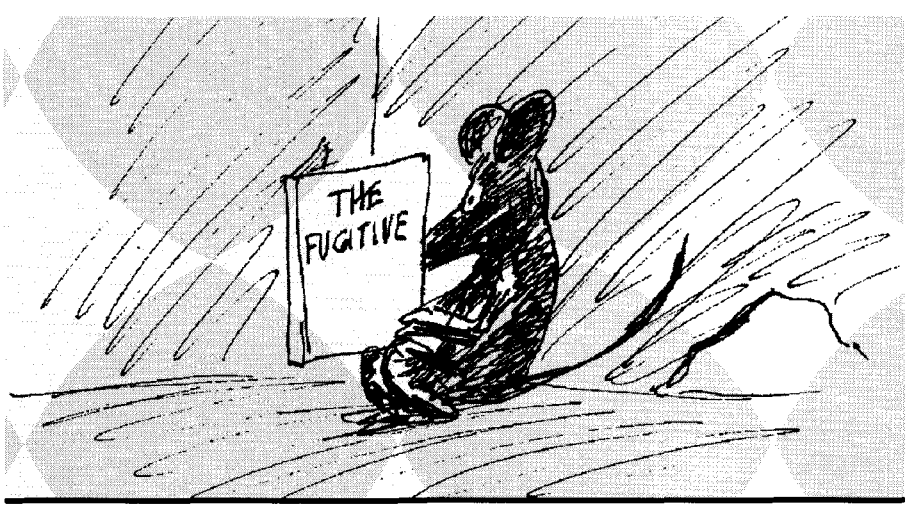
Virtual war is a product of cultures of comfort, a luxury of the powerful. Ignatieff himself would have preferred a more wholehearted military intervention in Kosovo, a more robust commitment to the protection of human rights. But even those of us who were more skeptical about the military intervention have much to learn from Ignatieff's probing analysis of the way bloodless modern citizenries operate. We take moral credit for our interventions, but we delegate the sacrifice.

The costs and consequences of our impulses to do good are a favorite topic of novelists as well. In Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (Anchor, $12, 262 pp.), the intervention is an unplanned impulse. A miscalculation in a hot-air balloon puts a young boy and his grandfather in danger, and a disparate group of men converge to try to save them. The child lives, the grandfather does not, but what interests McEwan is the strange and tragic bond that develops between those who run across the field to attempt the rescue.

McEwan's narrator, Joe Rose, finds himself torn between pride and guilt; more tellingly, he finds that the balloon accident has torn the fabric of the façade of his life. Lurking vulnerabilities suddenly emerge from beneath his steady success as a science writer, his loving relationship with his wife, and his pat convictions about the nature of the world. One of the other men involved in the balloon rescue begins to stalk Joe, believing that the accident had a higher purpose: to establish a divinely-inspired bond between the men. Caught in a web of feeling and confusion, Joe is drawn into ever deeper wells of irrationality as the aftermath of the incident unfolds.

Like Ignatieff, McEwan explores the abyss between middle-class lives shrouded in material comfort and the demands of sudden human suffering. Joe's actions at the rescue are impulsive, uncalculated, and even noble. But they are also out of step with the life he has lived. He is both deepened and endangered by his encounter.

Visions of the good are set against one another in deadly competition in an extraordinary series by Philip Pullman. Written for children, these novels possess a depth and complexity that will challenge the most sophisticated reader. In *The Golden Compass* (Knopf, $10, 399 pp.), the first in a trilogy that is nearing completion, the young Lyra Belacqua finds herself in the middle of a battle between powerful adults who have begun to unlock the secrets of the universe but wish to use their newfound power not to liberate people but to enslave them. In a story rich with elements of journey, fantasy, character, and drama, Pullman launches a deep moral assault on smug convictions of being right. His is a worthwhile caution in a time when our tools for repairing the world may be more advanced than our capacity to use them well. □



Daria Donnelly

Daria Donnelly is Commonweal*'s associate editor.*

What is it about gliding across steel rails at 60, 70, and soon 150 miles an hour that makes a body so aware of its solitude? Under that press, train riders turn to the strangers beside them, or to those found in books, for what feels like sacred company.

Commuting on the New York-Boston train, I've met three emphatically intelligent companions, forthwith forwarded for your summer pleasure: Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (Grove, $11.95, 402 pp.); Marilynne Robinson's *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Houghton Mifflin, $14, 254 pp.); and Alan Garner's *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and Lectures* (Harvill, $24, 244 pp.). These are "countercultural" works, urgently and stylishly arguing back against cultures that distort or threaten our humanity.

Imagine a novel about Pontius Pilate so good, so true, and so beautiful that when Jesus Christ reads it he removes Pilate from Purgatory to Paradise. Bulgakov's Master has authored exactly such a work, under the inspiration of his mistress, Margarita, and to the peril of his sanity. For his pains, he is denounced by a literary critic eager to inherit the writer's Moscow apartment. Stalinism's corruption of literary artists and critics is the broad target of Bulgakov's brilliant burlesque. The novel's theological gloss on life under the dictator (Satan enters modern Moscow to wreak breath-taking wickedness and God's justice) is comedy in the old

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sense. Think Dante, updated.

Bulgakov is one of Russia's greatest writers, but he was panned, pruned, and largely unpublished in his lifetime. Son of a professor of theology, the beleaguered playwright, novelist, and short-story writer once begged Stalin to exile him. Stalin assented to the writer's second choice, a job at the Moscow Art Theater. Bulgakov's "happiness" there may be surmised by the vignettes in the novel surrounding Satan's stunning performance in one Variety Theater. I won't spoil it, but the Master gets lots of new company at the asylum.

Stalinism, argues Marilynne Robinson in her essay "Puritans and Prigs," reveals the murderousness at the dark heart of social perfectionism, that priggish forgetting of the universal reach of sin she fears is gaining ground in America. Robinson (whose novel *Housekeeping* is as gorgeous as Larry Breiner suggests above) is a committed Calvinist. In *The Death of Adam* essays, Robinson seeks to renew interest in the ideas of the now scarcely known French humanist and theologian Jean Cauvin. She argues that Calvin, as he came to be known, had a large hand in shaping American goodness, and that our unjust and uninformed dismissal of his values and ideas has been disastrous for our country and our times. Call it *ressourcement*, for the allies.

Robinson undertakes her revivalist project in several genres: a testament of faith; hortatory reflections on public matters; historical accounts of Calvin and his circle, as well as those shaped by his legacy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the abolitionists among them. Ironic and sharp, Robinson is at her best when skewering with actual Calvinist history and ideas those most apt to dismiss and embody caricatured Calvinism. Real Puritans, she opines in "Puritans and Prigs," attempted to shape society by faith and reason, in contrast to prigs who are content to announce their opinions and "puritanically" damn all who disagree. Her essay "Family" locates similar ironies in the tendency of family-values fundamentalists to dodge the crucial role that the economy has played in reshaping the family along lines they deplore. These cool attacks on inch-deep politics are great fun, though she spares no one, not even the amused reader.

Robinson's fullest and boldest essay, "Darwinism," deftly uses Scripture to counter not the science of evolution, but the philosophy called "Darwinism," which she argues is poisonous not only to our sense of ourselves and our world, but to our political and social behavior. Though she calls on Darwin, Malthus, Herbert Spencer, Nietzsche, and Freud to mount her argument, it is her use of biblical verses, along with Albert Einstein's 1932 open letter to Freud ("Why War?"), and William Jennings Bryan's tabled summation at the Scopes trial that make for the most unexpected and persuasive turns of argument. These are the fruit of her intense and wide reading in primary literature. And her faith, which—contrary to elite and popular belief about belief—is intelligent, exacting, and (zounds!) relevant.

Where Robinson is bent on rescuing religious voices in the history of ideas,

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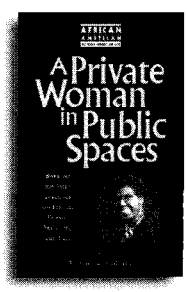

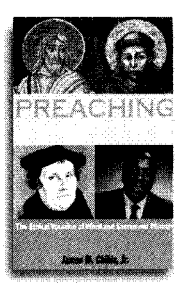

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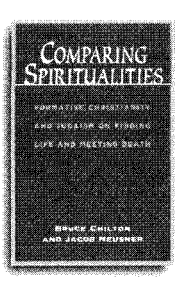

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British novelist Alan Garner has dedicated his life to saving the material and folk culture of his native Cheshire. I've mentioned his essays before [*Commonweal*, April 7], and bet I will again. Garner's meticulous passions are enthralling. Don't miss the essay on a wooden shovel he carried around for forty years until museum experts finally confirmed his Bronze Age dating. Or the fairy-tale essay which begins with the story of a friend's improvisational service in several armies, and on both sides, in World War II. Or the essay where he measures the severity of an impending bout of depression by his response to the dinosaur fossil on the kitchen floor of his medieval house. His weird (old-sense) writing testifies that you do not have to be an anthropologist, elegist, National Socialist, or New Ager to keep faith with the folk and reject a global cosmopolitanism based on mass culture. There are luminous reflections here on the vocation of writing, on myth, criticism and teaching, archaeology, and mental illness. Garner clings tenaciously to the rural landscape of his ancestors, now lightly occupied by Manchester's urban professionals. There he witnesses to an estranged past, retelling England's most ancient stories. □

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

is not at all clear that the current situation in Colombia can simply be equated with the recent history of El Salvador or Guatemala. For one thing, at the moment Colombia's *campesinos* and others are more likely to be the victims of leftist guerrillas than government troops. Nor do we share Ferris's conviction that U.S. involvement need always be malign. Millions of Colombians have demonstrated in favor of the negotiated peace President Andrés Pastrana is pursuing. Whether or not the guerrilla groups are serious about peacemaking is the question. If they are not, "more evil, violence, and death" will surely be the result regardless of U.S. support for the Pastrana initiatives. If U.S. aid enables Pastrana to forge a negotiated peace, the violence that now engulfs Colombia can be reduced, if not ended.

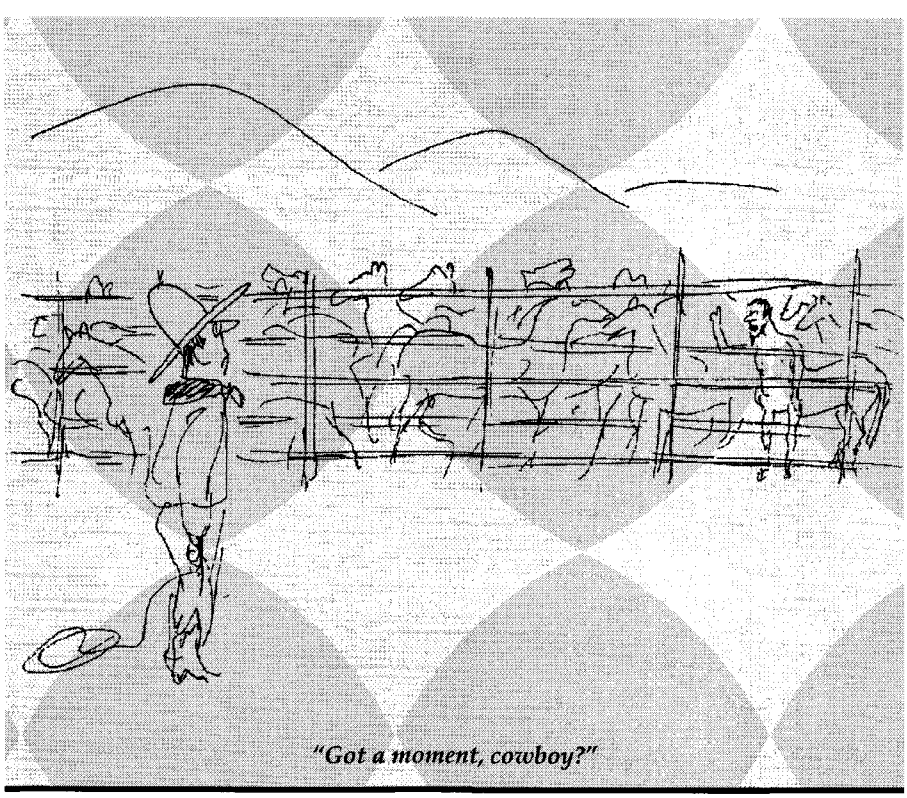
Missing Greene

Paul Baumann, in "The Novelist & the Director" [May 5], is far too generous to Neil Jordan's film version of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Jordan does not understand Greene's story. Although he does convey an enjoyment of the plot in the first half of the film, he never realizes the "inscape" of the tale, to borrow a term from Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Maurice Bendrix and Sarah Miles have fundamentally different responses to what has happened in the wake of the bomb that strikes his flat. Maurice does sense that he has had some sort of "experience," but remains inwardly unaffected; Sarah, believing her prayer for Maurice's life to have been answered, becomes profoundly grateful. From there the story explores gratitude, love, hate, anger, bitterness, and faith to the point that Maurice asks to be left alone, ungrateful to be alive and proclaiming himself too old and too tired to learn how to love. Jordan never grasped the heart of the story. He only connected, by some rearrangements, with the externals.

Graham Greene's religious vision is neither heterodox, antinomian, nor driven by predestination. Greene was a poet, in the true sense of the word, and it is misleading and dangerous to abstract theological concepts from the work of a poet (a good poet), or from the drama of a concrete life. To do so is to confuse realms. Jean Mouroux's *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith* (Sheed and Ward, 1959) addresses this tension between theology and the nature of personal faith. Greene realized that faith is a drama of persons and their personalities, human and divine. He was, at his best, a true poet who knew that this drama can be painful, exhilarating, and ultimately gripping, because it is a love story.

PAUL BUSSAN
New Haven, Conn.



"Got a moment, cowboy?"

Alleva returns

Paul Baumann's defense of the film version of *The End of the Affair* was written with élan but didn't come even close to convincing me. Here are my major problems with the argument.

1. Baumann says that a Sarah who breaks her vow isn't acting out of character. That's true only if you be-

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lieve that Sarah's character remains fixed, that she is everlastingly the sensual, jaded wife stuck in a loveless marriage. But her character isn't fixed. It alters radically after God accepts her bargain to give up her lover if God will spare his life. By the end of Sarah's earthly existence, she has become so close to God that she wouldn't evince the untroubled abandon that the movie's Sarah displays when she recommences the affair.

2. "The direction in which [Neil] Jordan takes the story—away from attributing Sarah's miracles to her steadfastness in chastity—is rooted in the novel. Greene's Sarah all but falters many times." Yes, *all but* are the key words here, though Baumann doesn't seem to realize it. Sarah falters, then holds fast to her promise, and the miracles she apparently performs *are* rooted in her steadfastness. That she writes, "I want ordinary corrupt human love" testifies to what that steadfastness costs this admirably healthy, desirable, and desirous woman.

3. "Jordan...emphasizes the futility of Sarah's resolutions by having her make yet another promise—to marry Bendrix. She can't keep that vow either—God won't let her. She's dying." Baumann equates this with the novel's Sarah deciding to leave her husband for Bendrix: "God stops her, Greene would have us believe, by having her husband plead with her to stay." But when a resolution is annihilated by death, it's a very different matter from a resolution defeated by a willingness to heed a spouse's pathetic plea. In the latter case, free will and compassion defeat the resolution; in the former, blind fate (or the will of God?) rules. Would Baumann have us believe that Sarah's capitulation to her husband was inevitable given her character? But the dictum, "Character is fate," was never one of the tenets of Jansenism or Calvinism or, as far as I know, any other creed of predestination.

The movie can be defended, but not in the way Baumann does it. I believe that Neil Jordan feels that God is so radically unanthropomorphic that He/She/It heeds not the petty efforts of humankind to bargain, plea-bargain, dicker with the Deity. (Remember rock star Jim Morrison screaming "You cannot petition the Lord!") That the movie's Sarah makes her promise to preserve her lover's life is a testament to the fervor of her love—that's all. When she tries to keep her vow, she's needlessly torturing herself. When she breaks her vow, she's simply stopping her self-torture—groovy. When the little boy is relieved of his disfigurement, it may be a sign that God is Love and is responding to Sarah's pity for the boy. But contrast that with the direct (though ironic) connection Greene makes between Sarah's faith and the healing of the atheist's affliction.

Making promises to Neil Jordan's God is like making promises to the ocean. You can if you want to, but it doesn't listen. Graham Greene's God is mysterious, unfathomable, but attentive to us. If the movie succeeds on its own terms, it does so as a refuta-

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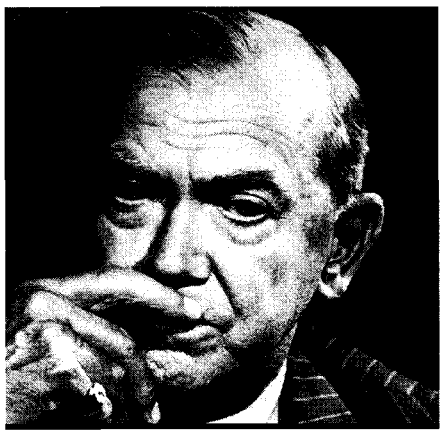

What would he think?

tion of the book, not as a faithful variation on it.

RICHARD ALLEVA
Windsor, Conn.

The author replies:

I suspect that my disagreement with Paul Bussan is more a matter of emphasis than substance. First, that Jordan changed Greene's story does not necessarily mean he failed to understand it. Second, yes, Greene was a poet, but he was fascinated by theological ideas and language and employed them purposefully. Those ideas can be identified and their coherence can be evaluated. My use of the terms "heterodox," "antinomian," and "predestination" was descriptive and not meant to hold Greene's fiction up to any theological test.

Like Richard Alleva, I prefer Greene's original story. But I was moved by the miracle at the end of the movie and charmed by Jordan's faithfulness to the explicit supernaturalism of the book. If, as Alleva argues, Jordan intended the movie to be a refutation of the novel, leaving the audience puzzling over a miracle was a strange way to do it. My modest claim is that the movie is a "plausible variation on Greene's design." I tried to uncover themes in the novel and elements of both character and plot in the movie that could justify the liberties Jordan took. Alleva's insistence that the broken promise renders the movie nonsensical rests on too moralistic an equation between Sarah's goodness and God's miracle.

Greene called himself an "agnostic Catholic," and described his experience of faith as an adventure on a "turbulent sea." I doubt that he expected God to listen in the way Alleva suggests. I also think Alleva underestimates the degree to which Greene and Jordan may share a certain sensibility, or even the same seasickness. I detected no allusion to anything "groovy" or to the fashionable idea that "God is Love." Quite the contrary: the movie, like the novel, remains a story of God's inscrutability and about the way all human love ends.

Space does not permit me to dispute Alleva's specific points. Each, however, is quite debatable. That said, I must now confess that our scheme to get Richard Alleva to return to writing about movies has worked to perfection! His refusal to accept my more benign interpretation of Jordan's film is a small price to pay.

PAUL BAUMANN

Curran's difficulties

Paul Saunders's recitation of the civil trial in which he represented Charles Curran, and the article's background information on the concept of a "canonical mission" were informative and interesting ["A Cautionary Tale," April 21].

But Saunders failed to tell the full story of Curran's difficulties with the teaching authority of the Catholic church. Curran's teaching and publications over many years, in such matters as the indissolubility of marriage, abortion, euthanasia, premarital intercourse, homosexual acts, to mention a few, were in direct dissent to the moral teaching of the church's magisterium.

Neither the Vatican nor The Catholic University of America wanted to fire Curran. It was Curran's own opposition to the church's teaching on faith and morals that placed his mandate to teach Catholic theology at Catholic University in jeopardy. Those who fear *Ex corde ecclesiae* should evaluate their own positions, and perhaps seek employment in non-Catholic colleges and universities.

WILLIAM J. DEVLIN
Philadelphia, Pa.

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THE OFFICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis seeks qualified individual for the position of Parish Social Justice Organizer. Part of a nine-person staff, this individual will recruit individuals and parishes into the archdiocesan social-justice network; train and organize leaders to take action; and coordinate the Campaign for Human Development. Requirements include three to five years of parish social-action work or community organizing, excellent writing and public-speaking skills, and knowledge of Catholic social teaching. For job description, call (651) 291-4477. Send résumé by July 1 to: Office for Social Justice, 328 W. Kellogg Blvd., Saint Paul, MN 55102, attn: Matt Gladue.

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Commonweal is sponsoring an e-mail discussion group until July 1, 2000. The group exchanges messages dealing with articles and topics presented in the magazine. To join, simply send an e-mail message to *commonweal-subscribe@egroups.com*

Happy e-mailing!

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COMFORT ME WITH IVY

Katharine Byrne

I would find it "hard to live in such a house," the reporter writes. "I couldn't stand to be that crowded. There is no view from the kitchen. I need a little space between me and my next-door neighbor. I could not bear to look out my window at someone else's bare wall." She is talking about new houses huddled beside one another in a treeless, far-out community.

My own kitchen window is only a few feet from the house next door, yet I do not feel deprived by the lack of a better view. About half a century ago, a tiny Boston ivy appeared in the dusty space below the neighboring home and began to climb and proliferate. Tough and shiny wide-spreading vines now cling to that side of the house and inch their way to the roof each year, waving in the wind and winding in and out of the gutters.

The outlook from my kitchen window offers a seasonally changing view as I sit at a blue formica-topped shelf at noon, with cheddar on rye or peanut butter and marmalade, and a cup of tea at hand. Lunchtime was for many years a precious respite for me. Long ago I ate my lunch here after the big kids went back to school and while the littler ones were blessedly napping upstairs. Time out to read the morning paper, or prop a Jane Austen or a Barbara Pym or the latest *Commonweal* against the sugar bowl, while appreciating the quiet and looking out the window. Now I may look at the elegant book about wall vines someone gave me last year.

Fall brings loud crashing colors to the view from the kitchen window; fiery red and bright purple and old gold as the ivy blazes in the waning sunshine. Then come the winds that tear the leaves from their stems and send them wheeling out of the yard and down the alley. By late November the vine is bare, a naked network clinging to the wall, waiting to outline December's snows.

First come furry light flakes that may soon disappear, but when January is deep and serious, icicles cling to the edge of the roof and to the tracery of bare vines. In thaws that occur throughout this mean season, the wall may be temporarily wiped clean—braced for recurring onslaughts of deeper snows that will pile up at the base of the house and a week later melt onto slush in the thin sunlight that slants from the south. And accumulate again and again in the long dark winter.

Beginning in March, sustained by cups of tea and the seed catalogues that come to brighten the gloom, a vigil begins for signs that shy Persephone, with many false starts and backward glances, is slowly moving north, greening the earth, carrying the warmth of springtime to this part of the world. One searches for signs and omens: pregnant nodes on the vine slowly fattening as pale sun finds the wall once more and warms its brickwork. Tiny bronze buds burst into pale green leaves, glistening in April rains.

As summer shines on us, sturdy tripartite leaves open and grow fat, forming shallow cups for rain. Sparrows hop through the vines, looking for insects. The wall is crowded with ivy, each leaf asserting itself in the sun and rippling in the hot winds.

Several times during my own long life at this address, catastrophic intrusions have threatened the vines' existence. The house outside my window needs to be tuck-pointed. The vines are torn ruthlessly from the wall, left to perish on the ground below as the tuck-pointers' trowels of mortar outline each brick once more, repairing the damage the ivy's tentacles have done to it. Inexorably, though, the following spring will find the insistent vine rising once again, waving in spring rains, reaching for something to cling to. Once more I will see new patterns on the wall, marking the progress of another year in this old house and the one beside it.

Around the corner of the house last August, another volunteer appeared, challenging the hegemony of the ancient ivy: a morning glory vine with flowers of heavenly blue opened each morning to the sun, brightening the wall in a late-summer splurge of color.

There are other views from other windows. One of these reveals a tangle of fir trees, too tall, too dense. Someone should trim them. Another looks out on the excesses of a perennial flower bed waiting to be weeded. Late afternoon brings to a third window the view of a gridlock of homecoming traffic. This insistent stream becomes heavier and noisier each year.

The view from the kitchen window, however, happily beyond my control or intervention, needs nothing from me, never asking that I do something about it; never urging me to prune, nurture, or cultivate it according to the directive of a vine expert. Or join an organization that wants to divert it to somebody else's street.

I read in my book that in ancient Greece ivy was sacred to Dionysus, the Olympian vintner who was one of the gods. On a cold spring evening I'll look out of my kitchen window and drink to him, lifting a tiny glass of Five Star Metaxa, a good Greek brandy I picked up at the Athens airport. □

Katharine Byrne *writes from Chicago.*

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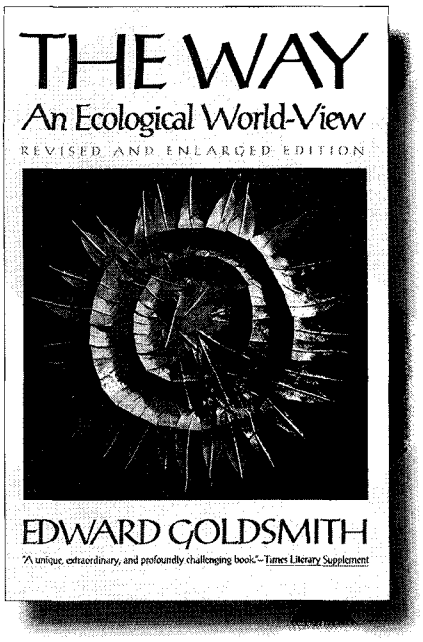
THE WAY
An Ecological World-View
REVISED AND ENLARGED EDITION
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"A unique, extraordinary, and profoundly challenging book"–Times Literary Supplement

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The Way is Edward Goldsmith's extended critique of the modernistic approach to understanding mankind's relationship to the natural world. He argues that instead of promoting economic development and world trade, we need to learn from the world-views of traditional societies, where human welfare is seen as being best served by maintaining the critical order of the cosmos (encompassing society, the natural world, and the world of the gods). In many archaic societies, a word existed for the "path" or "way" that had to be followed in order to achieve this goal—the R'ta for instance of Vedic India (later the Dharma) and the Tao of the Chinese. Whereas our society interprets major problems as evidence that economic development has not proceeded far or fast enough, traditional societies interpreted such problems as indicating instead that they had deviated from the "way," thereby disrupting the critical order of the cosmos.

A truly ecological world-view, as the author sees it, must necessarily be based on the world view of primal society, whose members knew how to satisfy their real needs without annihilating the living world on which we totally depend for our welfare, indeed for our survival.

Edward Goldsmith is a campaigner and scholar. He has written or edited seventeen books and a host of articles and is the founder of *The Ecologist* (1969), of which he is still the editor. He has taught courses at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and at what is now the University of Illinois at Springfield. He received the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize, in Stockholm (1991).

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